

SERMON: "WHERE ARE YOU GOING FOR LENT – TO SEE FAMILY"

**TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 32
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32**

**March 30, 2025
Fourth Sunday in Lent**

Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

When Johnny and I first were thinking about this series, "Where are you going for Lent?" this passage fit the bill perfectly. This is very much a story about going home to see family ... and how beautiful and awkward that can be. Anybody ever have an awkward visit back home? You don't need to raise your hands. That could be ... awkward.

I wonder if this return home might have happened over Thanksgiving? I think that setting just might work. I love Thanksgiving – family and food and football ... and maybe a few "did he really just say what I think he said?" a couple "there she goes again" and of course lots of questions (and embarrassing stories) for the person you had the courage to bring home

Thanksgiving is a big party, a feast. So too, was the party the dad threw when his boy came home. It had to have been awkward, don't you think? Did the party unfold with one group of friends around one brother and another around the other brother. Did it stay that way most of the night? Did it become a party for both of them, for the whole family?

Did the oldest spend his time talking about his brother rather than to him? Did the younger brother spend his time telling people about that distant land or did he instead talk about how good it felt to be back home, about lessons learned? Did the brothers make peace, maybe by watching the Detroit Lions game first then having a good honest talk? Did the brothers eventually embrace?

This story, as told by Jesus, ends with that party. It begins with a question when Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why "he welcomes sinners and eats with them." He answers their question with three stories about things ... and people lost and found.

All three stories include a lot of looking. First a shepherd looking for one lost sheep, leaving ninety-nine in the wilderness and looking for just that one Then a woman looking for a lost coin. She cleans the whole house top to bottom looking for that one lost coin. And the third and most familiar story a father looking for one lost son ... actually two lost sons

The first two parables speak more directly to the how and where of the looking This last story begs the same question about looking. What were they looking for? the younger brother, the older brother, the father?

BROTHERS PLURAL

The story seems quite clear about what the younger brother was looking for
It tells us how he spent his money and his time. It says ever so politely,
A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

We can all too easily get a mental picture of that.
Actually, might get a little too carried away thinking about it.
We seem to like thinking about naughty someone else might have been
His older brother voices how he thinks his brother 'squandered his property'

But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!

The older brother has jumped to and reached his own conclusions
The story does not give us the specifics of the squandering. We are told enough

Many a sermon and Sunday School lesson has focused on this child – his sin,
his welcome home. Maybe you've heard the story end with his return home
with verse 24 and the announcing of an impromptu party for him
with no mention of the older brother – his sin, his welcome home

Let's be clear the story is very much about both sons.
Paying closer attention to the story we see the consistency of the father
He approaches both of them, he interrupts their talk of being servants
and makes it clear they both are beloved children
The party is for both his boys, for his family

The brothers have much in common. There are two key things they both do and say
One, the story begins with sons who ask for their inheritance upfront.
Yes, the older brother knew about it. The text says that the father divided
their inheritance between them. Them! Plural!

The older brother is complicit in this treatment of their father
As the oldest child it would be his responsibility to say "no"
In that culture, the oldest son has that kind of power / influence
He could have said, should have said ... "No, my brother, do not ask this
of our father. No, I won't be a part of this." That would have settled it.

Pay attention older brothers. This story isn't just about your spoiled little brother!
It's about us too. The older stay at home brother is not innocent.
His silence when he could have and should have spoken up screams at us.

That is one thing they had in common. They both distanced themselves
from their father with their request for their share of the inheritance
One distanced himself by going to a far country, one distanced in place

FAMILIES & OUR AKWARDNESS

The other thing they both did is forget who they were in relationship with their father
When the younger son “comes to his senses” and decides to go back home, he does so thinking of himself not as a son but as a servant.
He has his speech rehearsed.

I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

The older brother says much the same thing when his father goes out to him
We pick up the story again after the father has welcomed the prodigal home while the Welcome Home party is just getting started

Now his elder son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked him what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come home and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his Father, ‘Listen, for all these years, I have been working live a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

Both boys describe themselves as servants.

One says “treat me like one of your slaves.”

The other says, “I have been working like a slave for you.”

The father, when he goes out to both of them (yes, he goes out to both) has to correct them. The father reminds them they are each his beloved sons.

I think that consistent love, that steadfast (and in this case surprising) love, that love that comes looking for us and for our siblings, might help us deal with the awkwardness in this story and our own stories, in our own families.
So let’s move from speculation about this family and think about our own families – any awkwardness, any tensions there?

And since I’m talking about awkwardness – an awkward transition

My dad, he would later admit after being prompted by my mom, was spoiled
He was an only child whose father owned a car dealership.

Kivett Motors in Burlington, NC. They had it pretty good

When my dad went off to college, my grandfather was approached with an offer
There was a new automobile brand coming. It would be the next big thing
My grandfather agreed and was soon selling, or trying to sell ... the Edsel

Show image – car dealership and promo

SUMMARY

The Edsel is known as a colossal failure. My grandfather's business did not survive. My two brothers and I were talking about that. I said, "Can you imagine what things might look like today if that worked, us working in the family business selling cars in Burlington?" I thought my tone made clear what I thought of that scenario.

My youngest brother, Josh, 12 years younger than me, said, "That would be pretty cool, wouldn't it?" My middle brother said nothing. Wise man. I responded saying, "Are you kidding me? The three of us working together everyday?"
Josh, I love you, but I probably would have killed you by now?"

Ok. I admit, that says much, much more about me than it does about him. One way we each in our own ways make family work is how much time we spend together. What works for some is a bit of distance (but not too much)

Beth and I, talking about my retirement, have decided on a future hometown
We're not going to move to Asheville or Greensboro, where our boys live
We're not going to move to Concord, Beth's hometown. We're going to move in between, to Salisbury – an hour from one son, two hours from the other
Close, much closer, but not on top of. That's what works for the Kivetts.

The distance thing works differently for different folks, it may be time not space
But that's not exactly theological advice. Here's the theology in this beloved story
It is the foundation of how families treat each other (and those beyond really)
Every child, in the eyes and heart of the loving parent that is our God
is very much worth looking for. God is always on the lookout!

Every one of us is worth the embrace of a parent running down the road
or out into the field or halfway across the country to remind us
that we are not servants, we are God's beloved children – siblings
Recognizing 'whose' someone is ... is the beginning of recognizing who they are
Recognizing whose we are helps us embrace the awkwardness of being family

You know one of the things that makes this family's story so powerful
is that it ends with an invitation to that awkward, beautiful homecoming party
It doesn't wrap up everything neatly with a bow ... it leaves us to live the story

I for one like the interpretation of what happens next after the party to Annie.
That is what my kids call my mom, their grandmother. The story could use
a strong female lead, especially when her boys would fight with one another.
Annie would send us to our rooms with a strong penetrating stare
"Go to your rooms and do not come out until you're ready to work this out"

I tried coming out of my room early many times, only to be told to go back
Took me a while to realize that Annie wasn't buying any talk about how wrong
my brother was, how right I was. The wisdom from her I would share with you,
maybe you can use this Thanksgiving, is this turn of phrase ...
"It is more important to make it right than it is to be right."