

Hope Month: Isolation - Family

INTRO

Every family has distinctives. Things that they do or ways that they operate which make them unique.

For example, my parents and my sister joke that our motto should be, “If I aint leading, it aint worth doin’.” We love to lead. And then of course we go back and fix the bad grammar of that sentence because good grammar is very important to us. **It’s a distinctive.**

My wife Olivia’s family loves to linger. That’s one of *their* distinctives. They don’t really need a reason to be together. As long as they’re in the same space they’ll happily spend hours and hours and hours just hanging out.

What are **your family’s distinctives**? Are you punctual? Weird? Tidy? Funny? Do you all love a very specific type of dog? (That seems to be a thing.)

The point is, every family has distinctives, including the family of God. That’s what we’re talking about today.

It’s the final week of our series, “Never Alone,” all about healing the broken place of isolation. We’ve looked at **four important ingredients** in healing isolation so far and today we’re looking at the final one: family.

What it means to be a part of the family of God and how to live into this family’s distinctiveness.

ISOLATION

To do that, we’re going to look at one of my all-time favorite parables - the parable of the lost son. (a.k.a. the prodigal son). Grab a Bible!

Luke 15:11

It's one of those parables with SO MUCH depth that every time I read it there's some new angle to consider.

That's just the way the parables of Jesus are. In fact, in October we are doing a whole **BYOB sermon series** on parables. Bring Your Own Bible. We'll talk about how to read them - how to understand them. It's going to be great!

Ok, so Luke says up in verse 1 that the reason Jesus tells this parable is that he had been hanging out with "sinful people" and this made the religious leaders uncomfortable. They would rather keep those people *out there* - isolated.

So here's what Jesus says:

Luke 15:11-16

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

So, this younger son finds himself very isolated. He's far from home, doesn't know anybody, and basically told his dad "I wish you were dead so I could get your money." Not a great way to strengthen family ties.

At this point in the story, he's hit rock bottom. Especially **because he's feeding pigs.**

Now, there's nothing wrong with pigs. They're very smart, social creatures. Maybe I'll have one on my farm someday.

The reason feeding pigs is rock bottom in *this* story, is because this young man was - presumably - Jewish. And in the Old Testament law of Moses, pigs were considered **spiritually unclean**. Remember I talked about uncleanness last week when describing the isolation of the man with leprosy?

Well, if pigs are unclean, and he's working for a man who *raises* pigs, guess what that means? The man is probably a **Gentile** who, you guess it, is also, according to the law, unclean.

So this younger son is working in a spiritually unclean environment that is completely cutting him off from his own people. I mean, look at verse 16. He's so desperate he wants to eat pig food. It's as if **he's becoming an unclean creature himself**.

Ok. You get the point. Rock bottom. He's isolated from his people. Completely alone. But **how did he get here?**

Well, it's interesting. We in America tend to look at verse 13 and say, "well, it's his own fault." He "wasted all his money in wild living." He's isolated by his own choices.

And that's undoubtedly true in one sense, but when I was in seminary I read a really fascinating **article by a theologian** who asked that same question - how did he get here? - of people in different parts of the world and here's what he found:

In the US, again, people generally agreed that he wasn't wise with his money.

But when this theologian went to **Russia** and asked the same question, most people pointed to verse 14. "**A great famine** swept over the land." To them, he was isolated because of events beyond his control.

Interesting, right?

But get this. That same theologian went to **East Africa** and asked Christians

there why this young man was isolated. Some mentioned the money; some mentioned the famine; but the majority pointed to verse 16.

He was isolated because “**no one gave him anything.**”

In other words, the younger son found himself living in a selfish country where nobody looked out for their neighbor when they experienced hard times. *That* was why he was alone.

Isn't that fascinating? (Have I mentioned before how important it is to pursue biblical truth by listening to the voices of other cultures?)

The reason I tell you all this is not for us to figure out the “right answer,” - if there even *is* a “right” answer - but to point out the fact that **isolation can happen for a bunch of different reasons.**

Some of us find ourselves isolated and alone because **we're selfish.** We've wasted what we had on “wild living,” so to speak.

We've stepped all over everyone else in our pursuit of self - looking out for “number one.” We've done that so long that one day we look around and realize “number one” has become the “only one.”

Think back on the last few months. How much of your time and energy has been spent on other peoples' needs? How much has been spent on your own?

Maybe you are isolated because of your own actions.

Or, perhaps, like the famine in the story, you are isolated **through no fault of your own.** Maybe because of your health issues this pandemic has forced you into your home and away from community for your own safety.

Maybe you'd be close to people if you could, but you can't.

Or, perhaps you are isolated **because of the actions (or inaction) of others**. Nobody gave the younger son anything to eat. No wonder he was starving.

Maybe that's you. Maybe you're in an abusive relationship. Maybe a classmate has humiliated you. Or maybe you're isolated because it seems like nobody wants to invite you into their lives.

There are **a lot of reasons we find ourselves alone**, far from home, in the metaphorical pig pen.

So what do we do about it?

If we're isolated for any one of those reasons, how do we find healing? Or, to flip it around, if there are people in our community who are isolated for any one of those reasons, how do we - as the Church - bring healing to *them*?

DIGNITY, HOSPITALITY, PROXIMITY

Well, let's keep reading the story and find out.

Luke 15:17-24

"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'"

"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

"But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

My absolute favorite part of this story is **the little speech** the son has prepared. “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you...” You can imagine him rehearsing it over and over as he walks the long miles home.

In his mind, this isolated young man has lost the right to be considered the son of his father.

And yet, what happens? The moment his father sees him, he runs to embrace him. The son, probably a bit confused, **starts his speech anyway.**

“Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you...” But the father doesn’t even let him finish. He just *immediately* starts throwing a party to celebrate.

And this is cool: If you think of all the topics we’ve covered in this series of how to heal isolation... the father does them all. Take a look. Verse 20.

Dignity - When he sees his son he is “filled with love and compassion.” He doesn’t see a shameful loser; he sees his son.

Proximity - He runs *to* his son. He embraces him. Despite the fact that he was probably filthy working in a pig pen and walking dusty roads for weeks, the father gets close.

Hospitality - He throws the son a feast. The fattened calf is an expensive luxury for special occasions, and yet he welcomes him in.

Even **Unity** - When this son left home he implied his father was better off dead. And yet look what his father calls him in verse 24. “This son of *mine.*” The divisions the son created fall away in the father’s love.

The father heals his son’s isolation in every possible way. Why? Because his son is **family.**

Family is the final ingredient that **brings all these other concepts together**. It is one thing to have compassion on an isolated stranger. It's an entirely different thing when that person is your own flesh and blood.

Now, it's not hard to see in this story that in some way **the father represents God**.

Every one of us who follows Christ is a part of his family - sons and daughters of the king. And thanks to Jesus, everyone in the world is invited to join our family as well.

Earlier I mentioned how each family has **distinctives**. What's the distinctive of this family? **It's grace**. That all are welcome here.

No matter who you are or what you've done, you belong.

And as members of this family, we are called to treat the lost and isolated in our world as the father does - with *grace*.

THE OLDER SON

Of course, that's not always the easiest thing to do. Let's read the rest of the story.

Luke 15:25-32

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'

“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

So, despite the father’s love and grace being a distinctive of this family, the older son is not too happy about the younger son being welcomed home.

In verse 30, the older son **accuses his brother** of “squandering [his father’s] money on *prostitutes*,” which is normally how the younger son’s escapades are described when people talk about this story.

He’s “dissolute” - indifferent to moral restraints...

But when you look at verse 13, it says he wasted all his money in “wild living.” The Greek word *asōtōs*. This is the only place in the Bible where this word shows up. And more recently, scholars have started to argue that it’s **better translated as reckless**.

In other words, the son wasn’t necessarily being *immoral*. He was just being **bad with his money**. He was wasting it. If that’s true, then the older brother’s accusation about prostitutes is just slander. He’s just slinging mud.

Besides, according to the narrative, the older son *just* now heard that his brother was back. How would he have known what his brother did while he was gone?

The younger son, isolated and alone, is given dignity and hospitality by his father. His father chooses proximity and unity with him, despite his past choices.

That is the distinctiveness of this family. The father’s love and grace defines this family’s identity.

But **this older brother wants nothing to do with it**. He’s standing in the way

of his brother's isolation being fully healed. He doesn't even call him his brother. In verse 30 he says "this son of yours..."

If this is a family defined by love and grace, then in this moment **the older brother has become a lost son as well**. Suddenly *he's* the one who's isolated.

Here's why I'm telling you this. We are living in an insanely **divided time**. From politics to race to culture wars to classism. We don't just disagree with one another. We hate each other.

We all love the idea of each of us acting like the father in this story. Of welcoming isolated people into our lives. Dignity, hospitality... yes!

Until we learn about **their political views**. Or hear their take on the Black Lives Matter movement. Or learn what they believe about evolution or guns or vaccines or homosexuality or capitalism.

Suddenly we're not the father in this story. We become the older brother. "That person doesn't *deserve* to be in community with me. I don't want to be associated with *them*. I know they're isolated but they made their choice. Let 'em stay in the pig pen."

We do this on **both sides** of the spectrum.

I know that might all sound a bit extreme, but these are extreme times. We are divided, just as they were in ancient Israel.

There's a reason Jesus doesn't end the story with the younger son coming home. He ends it with the older son out in the cold, implored by his father to join the party, **but left with a choice**: "Do I join in the healing of my brother's isolation, or do I walk away and let my own isolation grow?"

Until we are willing to set aside our indignation, to give up our "right to be right," until we experience the unity Maron talked about two weeks ago, we

cannot become the irresistible movement of love that can heal our isolated world.

But if we do - if we see one another with **dignity**... if we open our lives to one another with **hospitality** as Tim described... if we pursue **proximity** with those the world says are untouchable... if we, like the older brother *could* - if we choose **unity** and enter the celebration of our father's love... then isolation doesn't stand a chance.

Because in Jesus we are **family** - a family defined by grace - and we all belong in our father's house.

FAMILY

Like I said, the story of the lost son... or should I say the story of the lost *sons*... has so much depth to be explored.

And I think it is **so helpful when we think about healing isolation** in our world - either our own isolation, or the isolation of those around us (in 2020 that's not an either/or thing... it's often both/and).

So, to bring this series to a close, here's what I'd like to do. I want to give a little space for a brief time of prayer to see what God might be saying to you right now.

I'm going to ask you a series of questions and then just **let the Holy Spirit speak**. But first, let's pray.

[PRAY]

So, the Holy Spirit is with you right now. Close your eyes, pay attention to his voice, put yourself in the story, and take a moment to answer these questions.

In what way are you **like the younger son**? How have you left your father's house? How are you isolated?

Now imagine you are returning home and your father God wraps you into his arms and holds you close and speaks words of grace into your ear. What is he saying to you?

In what way are you **like the older son**? Who in your heart have you excluded from the family of grace?

Now imagine the father is beckoning you to come to the celebration. What would it take for you to join the party?

Finally, in what way are you **like the father**? What isolated person in your life do you see coming up the road?

Now imagine you run to them. You embrace them. What does it look like for you to bring them home?