

Lousy Parenting (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

Romantic comedies. You know what I'm talking about, right?

A man and a woman meet—at least in the Hollywood version it's a man and a woman. They don't really like each other right away. She's a buttoned up professional and he's a careless slob. They eventually wind up parting ways—usually because of some argument, like his failure to take life seriously and because she's way too uptight. Something like that.

There are clear signs that they both like each other, that at their core they were made for each other. And even though everybody else on the planet can see the attraction, they're just too blind to recognize it.

Then something happens while they're apart. One of them experiences an epiphany. "We are so meant to be together. How did I not see this?"

This epiphany is shared with a witty/quirky best friend who gives a knowing look, as if to say, "Are you really just now seeing this? Everybody else, even that lackwit down in accounting who wears brown suits and white socks, knows you're perfect for each other."

Unfortunately, the love interest who hasn't yet seen the light gives up on love as a pointless pursuit of elusive romance, quits her job, and goes to find the meaning of life at that exciting advertising job in New York, which has been waiting for her all this time.

The one who's just figured out the meaning of love and life, finally works up the courage and goes to see her at her apartment, which is now empty. He makes a grand gesture by dropping everything to chase the still-too-thick-to-see-love-staring-her-right-in-the-face-advertising-wannabe in a cab driven by a suitably sarcastic foreigner, in an attempt to catch the plane before it leaves LA on its flight to the

Big Apple. (There are other variations, like if **he's** given up on love and is going to Algeria to join the French Foreign Legion, she'll follow on the back of a cranky camel, led, of course, by a suitably sarcastic camel driver.)

Just as the chase looks to be futile, she walks out of the restroom at LAX when her flight starts boarding. She trips over a mislaid suitcase and falls right into his arms—which are filled with an airport hot dog and a beer in a huge plastic cup that he spills all over the both of them. Fed up with life, she starts complaining that he should watch where he's going as **he** tries to pull a stray french fry from her hair.

The star-crossed couple finally recognize one another, and she vaguely realizes what's happening, but resists by saying that she “just can't do this anymore,” that she “needs to be true to herself, and quit chasing rainbows.”

Ok, I've told you all that to ask you this: What happens next?

He grabs her face in his ketchup-smeared hands, looks longingly into her questioning eyes ... and kisses her.

We know, don't we? We've seen this movie or some variation of it—complete with stock characters and comic subplots—literally hundreds of times. We know what's going to happen in the end; our only real suspense is **how** they'll overcome the obstacles that keep them apart.

Romantic comedies employ a series of tropes, which is to say common literary devices, in the service of plots that are so well-worn we know almost immediately what kind of story we're seeing, and how it will inevitably end.

But romantic comedies aren't the only storylines we recognize, are they? Westerns with white hats and black hats. Action adventure movies with bare-chested heroes who escape fireballs/advancing hords/enemy spies/invading aliens just in the

nick of time. Sports movies where the beleaguered and overmatched underdog finally finds the strength and motivation to defeat the odds and a superior opponent.

We know. We've seen them all so many times.

But recognizable plot lines aren't unique to **our** culture. Other cultures throughout history have had their own recognizable plot lines, complete with stock characters.

In the ancient Near East, for example, there was common morality tale that parents told their children. Instead of beginning with "Once upon a time ..." or "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ..." this popular ancient Near Eastern story began, "There was a man who had two sons ..."

Not unlike the way generations have used fairy tales to teach children right from wrong, this story of the man with two sons

was a popular fable, meant to teach children the virtues of responsibility.

And, if you're going to show kids how to be good grownups, you can see how this story is supposed to go:

There once was a man who had two sons. The younger son was brash and unpredictable, while the older son was measured and reliable. The younger son asked for his inheritance, which he wound up squandering on fast cars, good liquor, and bad women. The older son, on the other hand, did everything right. He stayed home, took care of the family business, and always remembered to put clean the litter box.

When the younger son returned home hat in hand, Dad would sit him down and give him a good lecture about how upstanding young men put their families first, spend their money wisely, and learn how to wear ties and aftershave.

At this point the father would call in the older brother to drive the point home: "Look at Kevin here. He's done everything he was supposed to—showed up to work on time every day, did his homework before watching PBS, and now he's headed to accounting school, from which he'll graduate, get married, have brilliant children, and eventually drive a Buick. Why can't you be more like Kevin? And just to make sure you've learned your lesson, you're going to have to sleep on the couch in the family room, hand over your iPad, and wash your brother's athletic socks as a condition of returning home."

The moral of this story children? Eat your vegetables, wash behind your ears, and obey your parents. In short, be like Kevin.

Now, that's a perfectly good story, right? You can raise fine children on stories like that. Lord knows, generations of parents have tried.

So, when Jesus breaks into story in our text this morning by saying, "There was a man who had two sons ... " everybody in the audience knew where he was headed. They looked at each other, nodding their heads in knowing approval, tapping their children on the shoulders, as if to say, "Listen up, kiddies. You need to pay attention to this one."

But Jesus screws the whole story up, doesn't he? Everything's going great, just the way the script goes, up until we get to the part about the Father running out to meet the younger son not to give him the stern talking-to everybody knows he deserves, but to throw him a "Welcome Home!" party.

How are you going to raise responsible adults telling the story like that?

Generally speaking, there are a couple of popular ways of preaching this parable. I've preached it a few ways. I've focused on the expansive love shown to the younger son—demonstrating

that none of us are so far gone that God can't find us as we walk back up the road toward home. The grace of a parent toward a wayward child, who's come back. That's good, right?

I've also preached this from the perspective of the older brother, and how we good Christian folks probably ought to identify first with Kevin, who's shown up for work three minutes early for the past 25 years—and how it's easy for us to look down our noses at the wild son. But older brothers need to get over themselves.

Both cases run against the morality tale that would have been the original point of telling this story. Glorifying the first son would have been seen as scandalous, since this was supposed to be an anecdote meant to teach people inclined to reckless living that slow and steady wins the race for the older son, while the younger son has to eat frozen pot pies as his older brother smugly drives Dad's new Lexus.

So, if we wanted, we could still salvage this as a morality tale about a son who comes to his senses, returns home, suitably chastened, ready—after all his shenanigans—to take on the job of acting like a grownup. In this version it's a story of repentance. Teaches kids how to learn to say you're sorry.

Or failing that, this could be a morality tale about how it doesn't pay to be a bitter and spiteful weenie. The older son, on this telling of the story, needs to get over his feelings of resentment and learn to forgive his brother. That's also something we want to teach our kids.

And these takes are ***also*** fine. I've preached them both.

Unfortunately, though, both the repentant younger brother and the sullen older brother have as their focus the wrong characters—or, if not the “wrong” characters, then at least the “less interesting” characters.

Because I think the Father is key to **this** story—at least the way Jesus tells it. In Jesus' hands, the story of the prodigal son ceases to be a morality tale. If the original purpose of this common story was to reinforce the benefits of being dependable, which is to say, being like Kevin, then Jesus ruins it.

In fact, Jesus takes a story about good parenting, and turns it into a late night infomercial on how to make sure your children learn to **avoid** responsibility and turn out like Charlie Sheen. If this is supposed to be a kind of Jesus-y version of Aesop's Fables, ask yourself this: After the way the Father treats the two sons, how is he ever going to get another honest day's work out of **either** of them?

See what I mean?

The real kicker in this story, though, is that the father loves both sons. To the younger son he gives a ring and a party. And to the

older son he gives everything else that he owns: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

What kind of a God gives a pass to both the self-absorbed party animal and the self-satisfied brat? That just encourages bad behavior all the way around. It's bad parenting is what it is.

But what if the point of Jesus' reworking of this time-honored story isn't about tweaking it for the purposes of giving it a new moral?

What if Jesus uses this story not to shame kids into picking up their dirty underwear and setting the dinner table?

What if what Jesus is up to is simply trying to answer the question, "What kind of a God could love a jerk like me?"

What would a God who could love everybody look like? And by everybody, I mean **everybody**.

And that's not an easy question to answer, because most of us have fairly definite ideas about who's actually worthy of God's love.

But God's not as picky we are. Just look at the plot.

This parable is a story about bad parenting, about a parent who's willing to give it all away ... even to kids who've proven they don't deserve it. It's a story about the love of a parent who persists in pursuing us, even though we continue to run away from home or continue to turn our faces from the music, even after we've been ceaselessly invited in to the party.

It's a story about lousy parenting. I mean just think what would happen if we started following that example and loving everybody—even though they don't deserve it.

We need to think carefully about what Jesus is selling here. Since we're the children of this parent who stands looking out the window—waiting for us to come home, waiting for us to come inside—we need to ask ourselves, “Who are **we** looking for?” Because here's the thing, there are an awful lot of people who're trying to find **their** way back home—but they're scared that we who've been here for so long, we who've faithfully tended the fields for all these years—they're scared we don't want them here. They want to know they're just as welcome in this home as we are.

And if we're ever going to be like the parent who waits for us, our job isn't deciding who should be on the guest list. Our job is popping champagne corks when another one comes home.

And even more than that, we've got to figure out how to stop looking out the window **waiting** for them to find their way home. Instead, we need to go out into the street and find them while they're “still a long way off.” And we need to run to them, and

offer an embrace ... **before** they ever promise to get their acts together and start being responsible—like we're pretty sure we already are.

We're all looking for home. That's a well-worn plot. But maybe the point of **this** story is that even after all the ways we try to run from it, with a bad parent standing, nose pressed against the glass, maybe **home** is looking for us.

—Amen.