

After the Veal  
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

The photos of their reunion were poignant, endearing. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was finally home, her feet touching British soil for the first time in six years. An Iranian born, naturalized British citizen and journalist, Nazanin had traveled to Iran with her infant daughter in 2016 so that Nazanin's mother could spend some quality time with her new grandchild. At Tehran's airport for the return trip, Nazanin was stopped by Iranian authorities, and thus began a six-year odyssey of imprisonment, detainment, and separation. She was charged with purportedly "plotting to overthrow the Iranian Government," but was actually being used as a pawn in a game of diplomatic chess. Her husband ceaselessly campaigned for her release, his efforts including two hunger strikes and meetings with the Prime Minister during her captivity. Yet, the system seemed implacable to his efforts.

To be separated from your life and family for six years. She was incarcerated when her daughter was not yet two. Once freed, she returned home to a daughter who was almost 8. It is difficult to conjure

the scale of such trauma. It was self-evident to see the joy of the family's reunion.

Surely, there was a big celebration complete with all the foods she had most missed, a festive gathering rich with friends, laughter, and embrace. Yet, the party would end, the friends would return to their homes and lives and day-to-day routines, Nazanin's homecoming observed but their way of life unaltered.

When I saw a photo of Nazanin, Richard, and Gabriella holding each other close upon Nazanin's return to the UK, I was touched by the way they were leaning on each other, but I have to admit I was also apprehensive when I thought about the future before them. Nazanin's release from captivity would not end the disruptions for the family. The days, weeks, months, and years ahead will inevitably be marked with tremors reverberating from the earthquake of their individual experience of Nazanin's internment.

She was separated from a child in diapers. She returned to a daughter who reads. How do they even begin to re-establish the mother-daughter bond, or how do they construct the roles and routines of day-

to-day life, roles brand new to both mother and child. How will dad and daughter adjust to the partially alien presence in the house. How will mom and dad divide responsibilities that dad's been bearing alone? Will mom resent the bond that has evolved between dad and daughter? Will the daughter hold mom at a distance and maybe resent no longer having dad's undivided attention? Will she acknowledge mom's authority?

Having been in isolation for such long stretches at a time, how will mom adjust to the noise level, the mess, the demands of parenting in the chaotic storm of emotions and activities that come with a school-age child. And let's not forget that any marital tensions or irritations present before the trauma of captivity do not magically disappear upon reunion. When and where will the thought pop into the heads of mom and dad, husband and wife, "I forgot how much that habit irritated me."

Likewise, I cannot imagine the scale of similar trauma that will continue for reuniting Ukrainian families even after their current nightmare ends. The disruptions of life are not easily ironed out.

After the celebration of reunion, the hard work of love resumes. A movie may end with held hands and a golden sunset but what then? In a similar fashion, our parable today ends with a reunion, a party, and a question.

It is a story that can be read in a couple of minutes, but a story that evolves over years. What was life like in the house before the trauma of the younger son's demands? It is obvious there is affluence. They are landowners of such consequence that the adult children are part of the business model along with servants and laborers, and a vast majority of novels, plays, movies, and soap operas make it clear that the advantages of affluence are often mitigated by the jealousies and manipulation it inspires.

I find it interesting that there is no mention of mom in the story. Is she alive? Has she left? Is she present, but under the injustices of patriarchy, deemed irrelevant? If present, it seems mom's voice and emotions would be in the thick of all the events. How did the father relate to the sons? Was he an authoritarian, a control freak? Or was he easily manipulated and conned? Did the sons respect the father or were they resentful because his obsession with the business was experienced

by the sons as inattention and neglect? Were the brothers friends or mortal enemies? The Bible is replete with sibling rivalries. Cain killed Abel because Daddy was not a vegetarian and preferred Abel's lamb chops. We are still reeling from the rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael. Jacob's name actually means heel grabber because he was yanking Esau's chain before they were even born. And jealous of Joseph, his older brothers threw him in a deep pit to die, but then thought better of it and were conspiring to sell Joseph as a slave only to discover that the Midianites had beaten them to it.

We don't know the dynamics or dysfunction in the prodigal's home before the separation, but we know enough to know that no matter the era, people are complicated and love ain't easy. Our life narratives are never as glossy and poised as the family portrait.

Whatever was happening, it was such that the younger son breaches all manner of familial and cultural etiquette in demanding his inheritance. Thinking of the father, I'm reminded of the line from Monty Python, "But I'm not dead yet!"

Without conveying the hurt and humiliation that would accompany such a request from your own child, the father gives his son his inheritance. We should remember here that the conversion of land and assets into cash is no simple process and losing a third of your property puts a serious dent in household income. The father here loses income, most likely has to lay off workers, and sacrifices any security for retirement. Yet, all of that pales in comparison to the wound of a child coldly telling a parent, *I care not whether you are alive or dead. I want mine now and I'm outta here!*

Love is hard, and oftentimes, love hurts. Everybody from Roy Orbison to Nazareth to Joan Jett, Lil' Tjay, Playboi Carti, and Incubus will sing or rap a song for you testifying to that truth. "Love hurts. Love scars. Love wounds and mars."

Well, the boy leaves with a roll of Benjamins in his pocket, and though the story may take us into a foreign land, it's a territory all too familiar to families watching a beloved child wasting their gifts and losing themselves on a self-destructive path. And this wasn't just a weekend bender. The narrative could well have stretched out over years because famines don't arise overnight. To the tune of *Turn Out the*

*Lights, the Party's Over*, the younger son may not even remember where half of the money went. All he's got left is a hangover and maybe a string of Mardi Gras beads. Dire straits becomes his new Facebook status.

Consider the humiliation, a Jewish scion hiring himself out to a Gentile pig farmer, playing butler to a bunch of hogs. It's not the mud or smell that's the problem; the job rendered him ritually unclean. Bacon was not on the Hebrew menu. This was maximum humiliation.

It turns out the journey from dissolute to destitute is not all that far. Luke says that in examining his predicament the younger son "came to himself," and this reader is thinking "I'll bet he did!" Why, living in the bunkhouse back at the ranch in Israel was sounding like a dream compared to his current life status! His belly is empty, but his mind is full of ping-ponging regrets and schemes, self-loathing and survival plans. Can he go home, even if he can no longer call it home?

Meanwhile, back on the ranch, life has gone on, a heavy-hearted father and an overworked son having to cover double the duties since his brother's departure. Is dad looking out the window when Jr. comes

walking up the road carrying nothing but the speech he's been rehearsing the long way home? Luke says, "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Jr. can't even get through the intro to his speech before they're shoving a plate of veal parmesan at him while the guy from Brooks Brothers is fitting him with pinstripes.

No surprise here, #1 son is not so thrilled with the news. Where's my party, my steak dinner? And the ring! Why does he get the ring?

We don't like to admit it, but we get it. Lil' bro is an easy target after all. He made a mess of his life. That's true. It's easy to complain, to judge, to resent ... and we are sooo good at it. If we are honest about ourselves, we would be more aligned with big brother and the scowling faces at the beginning of the text than anyone else in the story. Sure, we've had our prodigal moments along the way, but we've probably spent a whole lot more energy rendering judgments and nursing resentments than we have spent acknowledging our advantages, and recognizing our own faults, our own need for forgiveness.

Well, let me give you a little inside scoop on our text. Jesus' audience is diverse here, and there is something in the parable for everybody, but make no mistake, Jesus is here reacting to the scowling faces at the edge of the crowd. Luke says, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Jesus could sense the snarky gossip of the self-righteous, so he told them a parable with an unmistakable thesis.

The parable celebrates the unearned and unfailing steadfast love of God. In 1 John it is written, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." But we don't have time for celebration or counting our blessings because we're too busy worrying that somebody out there may get something good who doesn't deserve it. But isn't that what this whole operation is based on? Ephesians says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

You know when I have sensed the greatest resistance and pushback through the years? When we've hinted that there are times

when we as Christ followers and we as a society are called to love, support, or advocate for people without regard to whether they deserve it or not. Again, Ephesians says, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

It's okay for the elder brother to be irritated because that what brothers do, right? But before we start crying crocodile tears for him, it would be wise for us to remember that according to Mosaic law, the older brother was promised to receive two-thirds of his father's estate as inheritance. The older brother had been in the front seat of privilege his whole life, and now he's ranting about a cut of meat and a new set of threads for his brother. Having already distributed his younger son's third, Dad wasn't kidding or exaggerating when he said to his moody elder child, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

Notice the care, the concern, the patience and forbearance that the father shows to both children. He runs to welcome the prodigal home. He leaves the party and patiently consoles the seething brother.

As I said, the story leaves an unanswered question hanging in the air. Will the elder son return to the party? And what will family life look like after the party? It's safe to say it will be complicated. Will new resentments fester and old irritations arise once again? Probably. Such is the nature of family, of being human. I saw a meme this week that confessed, "My family is temperamental; half temper; half mental." But then I saw one that was even better. It said, "Our family motto is: 'Well that escalated quickly.'" Sometimes you have to wonder whether it is God who is tempted to escape to a far country.

Yet, what we do know is that the father's love will remain unbroken. The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, the psalmist sings. God's steadfast love endures forever, even when you run away, even when you wallow in self-pity. Thanks be to God; we do not get what we deserve. We get so much more. Amen.