

Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Parents do crazy things that embarrass their children: kissing and hugging their squirming child goodbye while his friends watch, singing some crazy old love song at full voice while driving their kids to soccer practice, using their own spit to wipe the cheeks of a child clean. And for you pastor's kids out there—a pastor mom or dad may embarrass you by using something you said or did as a preaching illustration. Well, I'm not doing that last one today...

But most of us can remember a time when our parent's outlandish behavior surprised or embarrassed us. Or maybe *you* were the parent, showering your child with a love so fervent you lost sight of what the rest of the world might think.

Parents do surprising, crazy things.

When Sandra Bullock accepted her Academy Award last Sunday night, she thanked such crazily, loving people. She thanked those whom she said the movie *The Blind Side* was all about: "those moms that take care of the babies and the children no matter where they come from." She went on to thank her own mother who taught her: "there is no race, no religion, no class system, no color, nothing, no sexual orientation that makes us better than anyone else. We are all deserving of love."

That assertion that we are all deserving of love does not seem terribly unusual. We are used to hearing it over and over again in this community of faith... But for those who have felt like outsiders, unwelcomed and unloved, this is a drastic surprise.

Yet week after week in this sacred place we're reminded in word and silence, water and meal that God loves and accepts us. The only catch, of course, is that God loves and accepts others too. Now that sort of love turns our world inside out and upside down. Because it means people we don't like, or people with whom we disagree, or people who've done what might be considered unforgivable acts, are offered welcome, forgiveness and healing too. Jesus tells the people of his day a parable to prove just how countercultural this God is:

A man has two sons. The younger son asks his dad to give him his inheritance early, which the father does. Both sons get their inheritance before the father is even dead. The younger son sells the property and goes off and squanders it all away in unhealthy living. The older son got his share of the property too, but stayed around and continued to live and work the family homestead, which now has half its value. When the younger son has run out of both money and dignity, he decides to turn his life around and head back home. His only hope is to live as a slave among his father's family. But instead, when he comes home the father runs through the fields to greet him and welcome him home.

Today, it's not at all unusual for an adult son or daughter to return home after finding it impossible to make it on his or her own. But back in Jesus' time, this story would have had much more bite. This story that's all-too familiar to most of us, when first told by Jesus in the culture of that time is more like the ultimate parable of the dysfunctional family. Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor says its "A story about a weak patriarch with an absentee wife and two rebellious sons he seems unable to control, who is willing to sacrifice his honor to keep his community together. It's a reunion story, not a repentance story. It's about the high cost of reconciliation."

Understanding the culture at the time helps us to understand the extravagance of the welcome and what it meant in that community. Consider the code of honor for the patriarch. Patriarchs did not run. They welcomed those coming to their table, but didn't run to greet them. In fact, it's very likely that had the community gotten to this younger son first, this pitiful young adult would have been punished by the community for bringing such dishonor to his father.

But this parent does something outrageous; before the villagers can get to him, the father sees his son while he is still far off and is filled with compassion, Jesus says, and then he does what patriarchs don't do: he runs. Author and Priest Barbara Brown Taylor describes it this way: "he runs so that everyone can see his pale ankles, runs so that his robes get wedged between his legs and flutter out behind him like an apron—he runs like a girl, like a mother instead of a father—he runs and puts his arms around his son, and kisses him right there on the road, where everyone can see them."

Because if he can get to him first; he can save his son from being cut off—from both the family and the village. The reconciliation will cost him his honor, but it is a price he's willing to pay.

Then he does something even crazier, asking for the best robe, a ring and sandals--since only slaves went barefoot. And orders the fattest calf: a clear sign that this is not a quiet family dinner, but a feast for the village, for whoever will come and celebrate with them. It is a banquet of reconciliation.

This is a reconciliation party, not only for the younger son and his father, but for the whole community, the whole family... including the older son. The older son doesn't understand such outlandish forgiveness. He cannot comprehend that his sibling would be welcomed back with open arms. He's jealous and angry and he will not be part of any such party. Yet still, the father comes out to meet him, too—leaves the table and goes out of the house to encourage, listen and yes, even reconcile with the one who is too stubborn to come in.

In this parable we are drawn in once again to God's unwavering love. God is even more outrageous or crazy than our own parents. God runs toward us to forgive and heal us, even when we are running away. God adopts us into the family no matter where we come from. God is so determined to bring together all of God's children that God will do anything to draw us close... close to God's heart... and close to one another.

So there's a party going on in here! Yes, even during this solemn season of Lent. Can you hear the music? Will you join in the praising and celebrating and feasting? The banquet is for the reconcilable, thrown for anyone who will come, for we all need a good reconciliation party every now and then.