

DISENTITLED

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!’”

Luke 15:17

There’s a word you often hear in news reports having to do with politics — especially those having to do with the Federal budget. The word is “entitlements.”

Mostly, what people mean by that word is programs like Social Security and Medicare. These are programs taxpayers pay into, over the course of their working life, until the day comes when they hit that magic age. When that happens, they begin drawing on those benefits.

Entitlements are among the hardest parts of the Federal budget to cut. They’ve been called the “third rail” among government programs.

The reason is in the very word itself. Citizens feel entitled to those benefits, because they’ve contributed heavily to them over the years. Do you feel that way? I know I do.

But Social Security and Medicare aren’t the only form of entitlements. Beyond the world of government, there are other types of entitlements — even spiritual entitlements. Let me tell you what I mean.

There's a survey conducted of American college students.¹ It's a pretty big deal. The project is administered by UCLA. It's called the American Freshman Survey. Researchers have been crunching its numbers every year since 1966. One of the things they ask college students is whether they rate themselves "above average" in areas like academic ability, self-confidence and the drive to achieve.

The researchers have discovered, over the past four decades, a dramatic rise in the percentage of students who describe themselves as above average. It's as though all these students have moved to Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegon — "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

It makes no sense, mathematically speaking. How can nearly everyone be above average? But there you have it. It's what the students themselves reported, as they completed the questionnaire.

So, how to account for the change? I think it may have something to do with the huge emphasis, in educational and parenting circles, on building self-esteem. You see it in schools, in the media, everywhere. Self-esteem's certainly not a bad thing. It's just not the panacea some people think it is.

¹How college students think they are more special than EVER: Study reveals rocketing sense of entitlement on U.S. campuses, *Daily Mail*, January 7, 2013.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2257715/Study-shows-college-students-think-theyre-special--read-write-barely-study.html#ixzz2NBJLcg4j>

The first time I really noticed this trend was when our son, Benjamin, was in elementary school. That was nearly thirty years ago: so this stuff has been going on a long time. Benj, along with most of his friends, participated in a weekly after-school bowling program. At the end of the six- or eight-week series, there was a little awards ceremony. The parents organizing the tournament gave out the usual trophies for top-scoring bowler, top-scoring team, most-improved bowler — but then, I looked over at a table they'd set up and there I saw several dozen other trophies. Each one was identical: rank upon rank of little brass bowlers, forever frozen in action on their tiny blocks of marble.

Everybody got one: and they didn't look all that different from the ones awarded to the best bowlers. Just a little smaller. Every bowler in that league, it seemed — regardless of ability — was a winner!

I found myself wondering at the time — and I wonder still — whether that's a good thing. If everybody deserves a trophy to boost self-esteem, well then, what's a trophy worth?

Quite apart from the fact that it's a mathematical impossibility, I think pretending everyone's a winner may be setting up a lot of college students for a fall, come graduation. When you grow up in a protective bubble of calculated, self-

esteem-building praise, then what happens when you have to step outside the bubble, at last? In a world where it's most certainly not true that everybody gets trophies, what's the point of raising our kids to believe otherwise?

The American Freshman Survey also revealed what it calls “a disconnect” between the students’ opinions of themselves, on the one hand, and what the researchers tersely call “actual ability.” Writing skill is one example. According to an article reporting on the survey results: “While students are much more likely to call themselves gifted in writing abilities, objective test scores actually show that their writing abilities are far less than those of their 1960s counterparts.” *Ouch!*

All this, I think, points to a pervasive dread of failure. There seems to be a belief today — on the part of parents, teachers, everyone — that failure’s always a bad thing. It saps self-confidence. The solution? Simply arrange things so no one fails. Everybody gets a trophy. Every student deserves an “A” on the exam. Everyone who attempts a difficult challenge is entitled to succeed.

One of the researchers — a psychologist — says this:

“What’s really become prevalent over the last two decades is the idea that being highly self-confident — loving yourself, believing in yourself — is the key to success. Now the interesting thing about that belief is it’s widely held, it’s very deeply held, and it’s also untrue.”

If I should ever go into an operating room for brain surgery — and I hope I never will — I don’t want a surgeon whose chief credential is high self-esteem.

No, I want one who's a wizard with the scalpel — not to mention a track record of bringing hundreds of patients through the same procedure successfully. If surgeons who display that kind of result have a positive self-image, well, good for them! But high self-esteem does not a successful operation make.

The word “entitlement,” of course, contains within it the word, “title.” Think of some of the things that word “title” means. In a country like Great Britain, for instance — that has a class system even to this day — there are certain people who have titles. They are, of course, members of the nobility. When the American actor Meghan Markel married Prince Harry, one of the many things she acquired was a title: Duchess of Sussex. The gift of the Sussex title to her husband — from whom she acquired it by marriage — was at the sole discretion of the Queen.

Once people are entitled in that way, the title attaches permanently to them. Should a member of one of those noble families fall upon hard times and be forced to sell off their country estate or castle, the title doesn't go with the property. It can't be bought or sold. It belongs, irrevocably, to the person. The only one who can change that is the Queen, who would take away the title only in the most dire of circumstances, like treason.

In another sense of the word, a title conveys ownership of something. We recently bought a new used car, to replace the old junker Claire had been driving.

We couldn't make the trade-in until we'd brought in not only the car itself, but also the title: the legal certificate of ownership.

The same is true of a piece of property. When you buy a house, you're well-advised to go through a title search — checking the records to make sure there's no competing claim of ownership.

There's a good example of an entitled person in the Bible. It's a rather self-absorbed young man known as the prodigal son. You find him, of course, in Jesus' parable of that name.

“Prodigal” is another word for “wasteful.” After demanding his share of his father's inheritance before the old man's even dead — a grave insult — that's exactly what this burnout son does. The prodigal son squanders it all: every last shekel. His older brother later complains to their father that he has “devoured your property with prostitutes.” Until the prodigal has that famous moment of reckoning in the pig pen, this younger son has gone through life feeling thoroughly entitled. The boy has no self-esteem problem. If it makes him happy, he not only wants it. He's certain he deserves it!

The younger son's not the only one in the parable who feels entitled. Just take a look at the other kid in the family! Unlike his wild and reckless brother, this older son seems to have done everything right. He's obediently gone into the

family business. He's worked hard and achieved a modicum of success. Yet when this older brother finds out their father's preparing an epic party for his long-lost son, the older brother reminds him *he's* the only one entitled to such extravagance.

So, here we have two brothers. Both of them have become mightily adept at the entitlement game. There's only one character, it turns out, who does not seem to feel entitled in any way. And that, of course, is the father.

You can see just *how* unentitled the father really feels in his reaction to his younger son's outrageous demand to cash out and leave home. Now, if the father had practiced even the tiniest shred of entitlement-thinking, he would have said, "Son, are you crazy? That's my money. I, not you, am the only one entitled to it — as long as I'm still breathing. Should I choose to bestow my generosity upon you in my will, that's my business, and mine alone!"

Yet, the father doesn't say anything remotely like that — despite the fact that, in the context of his culture, he's got every right to do so. The father is, in fact, the most entitled person around. He's the patriarch. Yet, this loving father, who's been missing his wayward son more than words can say, takes the ring from his finger — the very symbol of his authority — and gives it to him. Then he calls for the fatted calf to be slain — if he'd followed the entitlement traditions of his culture, the father would have never done such a thing. Had he felt mercifully inclined towards his no-good son, the more typical response would have been to

take him up on his offer to sign on as a hired hand. If the boy kept to the straight and narrow for a decade or so, he just might be lucky enough to be invited to leave the farmworkers' bunkhouse and rejoin his family in the big house.

The younger son has that marvelous moment of self-discovery that Jesus sums up in the little phrase, "when he came to himself." This marks the precise moment of the son's disentanglement.

It's as though this young man's entitlement-thinking has been a magical spell, holding his true self in captivity. It's only when the son abandons all entitlements — when he comes up with that obsequious little speech, saying, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands" — that his transformation is complete.

Many of us know and love this Parable of the Prodigal Son. We love the kindness and mercy the father shows. We love the heartfelt repentance of the prodigal. We even love the red-faced outrage of the older brother, who's turned into a stammering fool by the triumph of unconditional love.

Yet, when you and I put ourselves into the story, when we use it to measure our own lives, isn't it true that we come up wanting? This parable is a truly revolutionary tale. It runs against the grain of the ways we usually think. It's

revolutionary in the way it teaches us to let go of our own, deeply-cherished entitlements.

That's a deeply frightening thing to do, because without those entitlements — the things we believe we've earned, the things we feel we deserve in life — some of us are left to wonder who we really are.

Unless — sometime in life — you and I manage to go through that process of disentanglement, allowing all those protective layers of ownership and achievement to be stripped away, we will never “come to ourselves,” as the prodigal did. Nor will we ever experience divine love in all its dimensions: the cleansing, soul-searing love that can only be known in that moment of true repentance, of utter dependence on God and no other. If you and I fail to do that sometime in our lives, Jesus seems to be saying, we'll never find true happiness.

Entitlements so easily degenerate into walls that separate us from fellow human beings. In a marriage, when either partner has a sense of entitlement but the other does not, they've got a rocky journey ahead. The happiest marriages are those in which neither partner claims any sense of entitlement over against the other. Both partners strive to celebrate the things they're entitled to, together.

Behind many criminal acts, there lurks a hunger for entitlement — however twisted and misguided it may be. The broken, criminal logic is to say, “I deserve this, and it's not going to come to me any other way, so I'd better just take it.”

The most mature form of Christianity is the polar opposite of that kind of thinking. To become a Christian involves admitting to ourselves, and to the world, that we have no claim on heaven based on our good works. Rather, we have learned the hard and painful lesson that we are wholly dependent on God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Entitlements and grace, you see, are mutually exclusive. The two never can occupy precisely the same space at the same time. The very nature of divine grace is that it is a gift God bestows, regardless of entitlements.

The truth the prodigal son learns in the parable — and the truth you and I can learn, as well — is that grace comes only to the disentitled.

So, let's stop treating the name "Christian" like it's some kind of trophy: a shiny badge of achievement for the spiritually above-average. If there's one thing this parable teaches us, it's that salvation is not something we have earned or deserve: that it's a gift from our generous God, who's always eager to welcome us home!

That offer of welcome is the inspiration behind our next hymn, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling." It was written with the parable of The Prodigal Son in mind. As we sing it, let's be mindful of the ways we may yet be hesitating to accept the unconditional blessing our Lord offers.

But first, let us pray:

**Lord, when we have become
so reliant on ourselves
that we cannot see
the need that gnaws
so deep in our souls,
open our eyes,
open our hearts,
open our mouths
to cry out
for the help you do not withhold
and do not ration,
the deliverance you delight to offer
in glad and generous measure.
Welcome us home, O Lord. Welcome us home!**

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