

“Do You Remember Elizabeth Smart?”

Luke 15: 25-32

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Don't you wish all stories could have happy endings like Elizabeth Smart's? You recall that she was the fourteen-year-old teenager from Salt Lake City, Utah that was abducted from her home on June 5, 2002. She lived in fear for ten months with her abductors, Brian and Barzee Mitchell, until her calm yet miraculous rescue a little over a year ago, March 12, 2003.

The entire nation rejoiced with her family as they welcomed her home with tears of relief and joy. The weekend after her homecoming, her parents, Ed and Lois Smart held a celebration at a local park that hundreds attended.

Like you, I read several articles about this incident. I found one article in particular to be intriguing. It talked about all the counseling that Elizabeth and her family will need in the years to come. This ordeal has scarred them for life and they will need a lot of help to adjust.

Have you noticed something about families? As soon as one problem is solved, another usually follows it. This is true not only for the Smart family in Utah but also the family of the Prodigal Son that Jesus told about years ago. Let me explain.

This father's worst nightmare ended when his wayward son came home with a new attitude. You recall that his son left home with a lot of money and little maturity, which was a lethal combination. He lost not only his money but also his pride and freedom.

However, he found his way back home to his loving father. What a relief this must have been for this worried father. What a burden was lifted! That problem which caused him more pain and prayer time than any other had been resolved. So, it was time to celebrate. The fattened calf was killed and the party began. Everybody was happy, right? Read on.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him” Luke 15:25-28.

Let me ask it again. **Ever noticed in a family when you solve one problem, you are usually met by another?** We yearn for a time when all the problems will be solved and issues resolved. Sometimes, we even fool ourselves by thinking that day is just around the corner. It's not and never will be. **Why?**

Families are composed of people and people can make bad decisions, surprisingly bad. Both of this man's sons were guilty of that. The Prodigal chose the wrong friends and spent his money and time unwisely. On the other hand, the Prodigal's older brother let jealousy and anger dictate his response to his brother's homecoming and as a result said ugly things about his brother and boycotted the celebration.

Now, I am not saying that all family problems are the result of bad decisions. Sometimes people are victims of others' decisions or circumstances beyond their control, like Elizabeth Smart was. Some of our problems are even good problems, the result of challenges that need to be accepted or dreams whose time to become reality have surfaced. However, in this story the father's problems were the result of bad decisions by his sons. I suspect that many of our family problems evolve from foolish decisions, too.

How does this affect us as families, though? When people get in trouble, even if it is their fault, they tend to look to family for help. Many turn to parents, siblings or other family members to help them deal with their problems. Isn't this why God created families? He knew we would need a support group, especially after making bad decisions.

So, what do you need in order to help family members with problems? What did the father of these two boys need? He needed determination, stamina, wisdom, understanding, courage, discipline and superb communication skills. However, most of all, I think he needed patience and unconditional love. He needed to love these boys at their best and worst, bearing with them, not giving up on them.

Remember John Hinckley, Jr.? He was the young man that tried to assassinate President Reagan. His parents have written a book about that experience from their perspective called Breaking Points. Let me share an excerpt.

“What do you say the first time you see your son after he has done the unthinkable? ‘Why did you shoot the President, son?’ Of course you don’t. Instead, as we had done a number of times on the phone since Monday, we told John that we loved him. No amount of anger or revulsion could change that. We assured him that we intended to see this thing through together.”

Where do you find this ability and the qualities needed to help a family member in trouble? How do you act lovingly toward someone that has disappointed and hurt you deeply? What do you do with your anger and disgust over a family member that has been wasteful, ungrateful, dangerous, immoral and rebellious? What do you do with your feelings of disgust, sadness, resentment, surprise, discouragement, heartache, grief, remorse, embarrassment, shame, guilt, fear and self-pity? How can you discover and provide sound reasoning and clear judgment when your emotions are so intense and mixed? How can you help someone that has brought so much stress into your marriage and pain into your life? You can’t, at least not on your own. This challenge is bigger than you are. You, too, must have help and the first place to go to find that help is on your knees in prayer praying to the “God that was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (II Corinthians 5:19).

When Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian and philosopher was asked, “Where is God?” he replied, “God is between people.” This is certainly true in families. He delights in bringing wounded family members together providing the patience, wisdom, love and hope necessary to heal relationships. Surely this was one point Jesus was making in this powerful and moving story.

This is the idea behind the Pendulum Principle. “Every encounter with man must be balanced by an encounter with God.” Solving family problems begins with praying to a God that knows about broken hearts, shattered dreams and lost children. Never forget, however, that He also knows how to mend broken hearts, rebuild shattered dreams and find lost children and is eager to help us do all three.

I must tell you that I was impressed with the Smart family’s reliance upon God during their ordeal and their willingness to express it openly. I don’t recall a news conference where they failed to mention their dependence upon God and request for others to pray with them. They were good role models for us, weren’t they?

Ever notice in a family when you solve one problem that another usually meets you? That’s all the reason I need to stay close to Him. I hope you will join me.