

Luke 15:1-32

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.'

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. 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. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."'

In this parable Jesus pinpoints the greatest cause of divide in our world, and the sin committed on both sides of the divide. On one side is the younger son who squanders his inheritance on wine and women, and even when he returns to the father there is no certainty that he has changed his ways (he may just be apologizing because he's hungry and needs another handout). On the other side of the divide is the "righteous" older son who considers it atrocious that the father is celebrating the return of his undeserving brother ("This son of *yours*"). Can we as a church and as individuals come to love and accept as the Father does? Can we get past

seeing God as our boss and think of him as a parent? Can we get past looking at our own individual morality as though *that* is what is required for God to love us and accept us?

Jesus had an uncanny ability to connect to people. We see that in the Bible; he would be criticized for hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, and the very people who criticized him invited him to dinner. He had open-air conversations with women at a time when it was scandalous for women to talk to men, particularly religious men, holy men. He was summoned by Roman centurions and he spent a weekend in a village of Samaritans who were considered enemies of the Jews. So when we look at this parable of the prodigal son we should understand that Jesus was connecting to certain people through this story. He didn't talk about the prodigal daughter, nor does he mention that this man who had two sons may have also had a wife and daughters, and the reason for these possible omissions is that Jesus is trying to connect to the audience that he is dealing with, which was scribes and Pharisees, who mainly...men!

So I would like to help Jesus this morning by contextualizing this story. Yes, we still live in what James Brown would call "a man's world," but I think that Jesus would want this story to speak to women as well as men, and I think he would try to connect to people by making the story something that they could relate to. So let me share with you a modern parable.

A man had two sons. He also had a wife who was the mother of his two sons, and he had two daughters. And the man and his wife loved their children dearly and took seriously their role as parents. They knew that it was a tough world to live in, and so they strove to bring their children up in a way that might ensure their happiness and their success. It was a disciplined way to bring up their children; from an early age the children were taught to clean up their rooms and do their homework and their chores, to come to the dinner table on time and say "please" and "thank you" and "no ma'am" and "yes sir." They were active in church. They were disciplined to go to bed on time, to as they got older to be home by a particular time. Compared to many other children *these* children had a strict upbringing, but the reason behind their strict upbringing was the love that the parents had for the children and their desire that their children would be well suited to "make it" in the world.

But as parents learn, no quantity of good parenting guarantees that their children will make right decisions. Parents are certainly influential in a child's life, but they are not the only influence in a child's life. Children are influenced by their siblings, and they are influenced by their peers and by their teachers and by their friends. And as hard as this mother and father worked to instill discipline into the lives of their children, things did not go according to plan with one of their children, with their younger son. While the other three children strove to please their father and mother, the younger son became rebellious. Perhaps he felt that he was too often compared to his siblings; "Do you see how well your sister did on their report cards? You need to try harder." "You see how well your older brother did on his standardized test? You should study as hard as he does." But instead of these comments making the younger brother try harder, it made him actually try less. Are you familiar with that expression: "the black sheep of the family"? That was the younger brother. And as time went on a greater distance developed between him and his siblings. The mother and father tried their hardest to make the younger brother feel loved and accepted and affirmed, but as his siblings seemed to shine more and more, the younger brother became more and more isolated from the entire family.

And then the day came when, at age 17, the younger brother was just gone. No note was left for his siblings or his parents. The parents tried to find him, inquiring of the people that the younger son hung out with, but all they heard was "I don't know." The parents prayed every night for his safety and safe return, but his brother and two sisters just accepted his absence. They almost seemed relieved by his absence because they considered their younger brother ungrateful and lazy and thus undeserving of all the love and patience that his parents had shown him. The brother and sisters quickly got used to their younger brother's absence and went on to college and jobs and careers and homes of their own. Each got married and began their own families. Meanwhile their younger brother's whereabouts remained unknown.

Until twelve years later. The parents, who had been hosting their Christmas gatherings each year, contacted their children to make the usual Christmas plans, determining when they would arrive and how many people would be around for what meal and who would be sleeping in what room, seemed particularly excited this year as they informed their children that their long-lost black-sheep brother would be joining them for the family festivities. The news was not met with great enthusiasm; the older brother and the two sisters who held hard feelings toward their brother because of the grief that they had caused their parents. Nonetheless they made plans to come to their family home and celebrate Christmas together.

As you might imagine this great family reunion was tense and awkward as the older brother and sisters, with a false air of joy asked question after question of their younger brother, looking for signs of remorse, some sense of shame over his past decisions. But what really upset them was finding out that Mom and Dad had postponed their retirement to raise money to bail their brother out of jail, into rehab, and back to school. Any pretense of civility evaporated as sisters and brother confronted their younger sibling with innuendo and accusation. "How long do you think Dad can work with his bad back?" "Do you have any idea how much pain you've caused them?" Did he appreciate the sacrifice they had made to get him to where he was today, and did he intend to continue to drain them of all their financial assets as he continued to squander their retirement dreams?

But the older siblings were not just mad at little brother; they were mad at Mom and Dad, who in their assessment had naively liquidated their assets for what they considered a hopeless cause. And they were upset that Mom and Dad had spent money on little Brother that could have been spent on them. "Do you know that I'm still paying off the loan I took out for graduate school?" "Little Lisa wanted to go to dance academy this summer, but we just can't afford it. I hate to see her talent go undeveloped."

There was little joy at the dinner table, and afterwards the family went into the living room, to sit by the Christmas tree. The grandchildren played with their new presents and with each other. When the strain of conversation had ended, Mom and Dad, who were now more often referred to as Grandma and Grandpa exchanged a telling glance as if to say, "It's time." Grandpa reached into his coat pocket and pulled out envelopes for each of their four children, handed them out, smiled and in unison with Grandma said, "Merry Christmas." In the envelopes were brochures for a resort in Orlando. Grandma explained. "Your father and I have been putting some money aside to take you all to Disneyworld this summer for a week. We've looked into airfare and admission to the park, and we've secured a time share, though we haven't set the exact dates because we wanted to check with you to find out when we could all go together.

There were a few expressions of thanksgiving among the brothers and sisters, but an apprehensive look between the older brother and sisters travelled across the room. "Thanks, but we'll have to see if we

can swing it.” “We’re really busy at the office; I don’t know if I can afford to take time off.” “We’ll think about it.”

Jesus left his parable of the Prodigal Son open ended. We don’t know if the younger brother remained at home, and we don’t know if the older brother ever joined the party and got past his jealousy and pride. I’m leaving this story open ended as well. Are there relationships that need to be reconciled in your life? Are you like the younger brother who believes that the scourge of past sin has left your status with God more like servant than son? Are you like the older brother, proud of your devotion and dedication but resentful of those who are welcomed by grace? God stands ready to invite everyone in as a son or daughter. I urge you to cast aside your guilt and shame, your pride and jealousy, and be embraced by a love that forgives and accepts you not because of your abilities and accomplishments but because you are a child of a loving God.