

“The Prodigal Brothers”

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Luke 15:25-32

Today’s gospel reading, commonly called “*the story of the Prodigal Son*,” is one of Jesus’ best known parables. Some of you might already be saying to yourself, “*Heard it! Know how it begins and how it ends. Wonder if the Flyers will make it into the Big Dance?*” The story of the Prodigal Son has probably logged more pulpit time than any other story with the exception of Christmas and Easter stories. I heard of a preacher who preached a sixteen week sermon series on the Prodigal Son. After the final sermon, a woman came up to the pastor and said, “***I’m so sorry that poor boy ever ran away from home.***” --Peter Gomes, “*It’s About the Father: The Prodigal Son*,” in *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, 2003, p. 236.

I dare say that every one of us would be able to tell of how the younger brother demanded his inheritance and went off into a far country and squandered it in wild living. His riotous escapades soon left him destitute and living among the pigs. Desperate, he finally came to his senses and decided to humbly come home and ask to be taken back into the family as a mere servant. We are stirred by the love of the Father who runs out to meet his wayward son and puts on him the best robe, the ring of family heritage and then orders the fatted calf to be butchered for a great celebration. “***For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!***”

What a wonderful illustration of God’s grace. This story is really about the Father and it gives us an astonishing snapshot of God who, like a loving father, patiently waits for his foolish son to return and then rushes out to throw his arms around his son, graciously welcoming the son back home. That’s the part of the story we know best and that’s why we often call this the story of the Prodigal Son. But there were two brothers in this family and the elder brother was just as much a prodigal as the younger brother. By-the-way, did you know that “prodigal” means “***foolish***” but it can also mean “***wasteful?***” Here’s the rest of the story of the Prodigal brothers.

Read **Luke 15:25-32**

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.’”

The Word of the Lord...*Thanks be to God.*

I have a hunch that the majority of us and the majority of those gathering in Presbyterian churches across the county would identify most closely with the elder brother. I know I do. I was born and grew up in a mid-sized town in Kansas....I have *always* been a part of the church...I never went to a “far country” to sow wild oats....I went to a Presbyterian liberal arts college 20 miles from home (I am pleased, however, to report that my class was instrumental in organizing the first dance....ever...at Sterling College *what a wild time we had!*)....from college I went directly to seminary in Boston (I really did sow some wild oats there....I acquired a taste for beer which was truly anathema to my Dad)....I got married to Connie and began serving my first church. I have seldom crossed the line. Johnny Cash, I am not! I have been responsible, loyal, faithful and obedient. I have never been convicted of a crime....well, I take that back, I did get a speeding ticket in Oakwood. My life has been that of the elder brother. And my hunch is that most of you have been good law abiding, responsible, play by the rules elder brothers and sisters, too. After all, Presbyterians love the phrase “*decently and in order.*”

The outstanding southern preacher, *Fred Craddock*, who was preaching on the story of the prodigal son, decided to test his listeners to see if they were really paying attention. So he told the story like this: *when the prodigal son came home the Father met him with the ring and robe. But then the Father turned to the elder brother and said, "You've been the responsible one. In view of your good behavior, while your brother has been off squandering his life, I've killed the fatted calf in your honor. Tonight we will have a banquet in honor of you, my responsible elder son."*

In the back of the sanctuary a woman yelled, *"That's the way the story should have been written."*

I have a hunch that most of us think the story should have been written that way, too! There is something very positive about elder sisters and brothers. If you want to get something done....give the job to an elder brother or sister. We pay our taxes, keep our lawns mowed, show up to work on time, give 110% to our employer, come to worship, strive to be good citizens, parents, children, spouses, friends and work hard at being responsible in all things. Most of us are elder brothers or sisters and there is a lot of good that can be stated on behalf of us loyal and faithful elder sisters and brothers!

But before we get too puffed up the point needs to be made that there can be a dangerous down side to us responsible and obedient elders. Even though the elder brother stayed on the farm and played by the rules he was just as lost as his younger brother. While the younger brother's lostness was out there for everyone to see, the elder brother's lostness was not so easy to see. He was a solid citizen who didn't squander his father's resources and he worked his tail off for his father. He was the model son!

But he was just as lost as his younger brother. See what you think of this....he tried to earn his Father's love! He thought what he produced, the long hours he worked, the rules he obeyed would catch his father's attention and win his father's love. Because the emphasis was on what *he* could accomplish he missed his father's love. Then, when his brother came home the elder brother's self-centered heart was exposed. All that resentment, criticism, judgment, envy, and jealousy came to the surface to reveal that the elder son had been in his own far country harboring sin in the unseen recesses of his heart.

When the elder son learned that his younger brother had come home and his Father was throwing him a party, he refused to join in the festivities. When his Father heard that the elder brother refused to join the party he came out and pleaded with his eldest to come to the party. The conversation may have gone something like this....

Father: *Son, why haven't you joined us in celebrating your brother's homecoming? He has returned and I have butchered the fatted calf in his honor. Come, let us celebrate together! Come let's be a family again! Son, come to the party for once your brother was lost but now he has come home!*

Son: *Dad, I have worked my tail off for you. Day in and day out, I have consistently been a good worker for you while your other son has been a lazy bum. I have sacrificed by giving you my blood, sweat and tears while my brother hasn't even given you a thought until he needed to be bailed out. I have been responsible in watching over your property while that brother of mine squandered your property. I have never disobeyed you while that brother of mine flipped you off. Now you have given him the fatted calf.... this kid that went off chasing after prostitutes! Now you are celebrating him? What about me? Am I chopped liver to you? This isn't fair!*

Father: *My son, it is true you have been responsible. It is true you have been a wonderful worker. But you never realized that I was more interested in your love than what you could do for me. I wanted your companionship and you gave me a day's work. I knew you were trying to earn my love and I yearned for you to see that my love was with you always whether you had a productive day or not. I often desired to give you the fatted calf and to honor you with a celebration but you stubbornly sealed yourself off from me. Just as I waited for your brother to come home, I waited for you to come home to me and receive my love that was always there for you. But you held me at arms length and would never allow me to get close to you. Oh, my son, my lost son!*

That's the danger for us elder brother and sister types. We work hard, do all the right things but can easily miss the joy of the party. We put so much energy into the task that we often miss the touch of grace, mercy and love. We go through life thinking that accomplishment is what really matters when God says that what really matters is that we make time to love and enjoy God and one another along the journey.

The father responds to his eldest son, "***Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.***" The grace was there all along. The fatted calf was his anytime he wanted it but he was stuck in "*I have to earn it*" thinking. The son lived in his father's home but was too busy to drink the fine wine that was continually offered by his father for his son's enjoyment. I fear that's the case for too many of us. We take pride in our busyness and we work hard work in and outside of the church. We are driven by our sense of responsibility....and it is good to be responsible....but our drivenness can lead us into a far country void of grace, love and joy. In that far country we simply go through the motions of living without enjoying the celebration of life. We might be in the sanctuary but the sanctuary of God's love is not in us.

The table of God's grace is always set for us. The bread and wine are prepared for both the younger and elder prodigal brothers and sisters. God is always ready to welcome us home from whatever far country we may have wandered. The band is ready to strike the chord of celebration and the arms of our great God are open and waiting. Life begins as we lay down the burden of running our own lives and we allow God's grace to lead us home.

Amen