

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 31, 2019

### **Grace Will Lead Me Home**

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-32

So we return to this familiar story,  
one of the most familiar stories in the Gospels,  
the story of...well, what do we call it?

The most familiar title is story of **The Prodigal Son**, or **The Lost Son**,  
and that title already brings with it a particular focus  
and shapes our perspective and interpretation of the story.

But we could give this story a different title:

- we could call it **Lessons Learned from a Life Among Pigs**,  
and explore the downsides of dissolute living  
focused only on getting and spending as much money as possible  
to gratify the desires of the eyes and of the flesh.
- or we could call it **The Prodigal and His Brother**, or **The Lost Sons (plural)**  
and so draw attention to this dysfunctional sibling relationship  
and to the ways these sons are estranged from one another,  
and from their father, and from their own best selves.
- or we could call it the story of **The Ticked Off Older Brother**,
- or as one scholar has titled the story, **The Lament of the Responsible Older Child**,  
which would bring an interesting perspective  
that might be relatable to many of us.<sup>1</sup>
- or we could call it the story of **The Waiting Father**, or **The Welcoming Father**,  
and focus on the longing heart of merciful father who is ready to forgive his child  
and welcome him home;  
and after waiting for they younger son to return home  
now longs to welcome the older brother into the joy of the household  
but must now begin waiting for him to accept the invitation.

It is interesting how the title we choose at any given time  
probably says a lot about us and about where we intersect with the story.

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We can see this lament of the older brother brewing  
in the painting on the cover of today's bulletin.  
Any of you who have been to the Chapel of the Prodigal at Montreat  
will recognize this painting as the centerpiece of the chapel.

Though it's a little small here to fully appreciate,  
the detail of the painting portrays the grip of the older brothers hands on his staff  
as he has just come in from working out in the fields.  
His brow is furrowed in indignation over his brothers irresponsibility  
and the easy welcome of the father  
who comes off as a bit of a sucker from the older son's perspective.

In the painting, the servants in the background, who have just killed the fatted calf, look like they are about ready to turn their bloody cleavers on the younger son.

And is it any wonder there would be resentment not only by the older brother but by any who witnessed the audacity of the younger son's request of his father, and his ungrateful departure with his premature inheritance?  
In that culture, to ask for your inheritance while your father was still living was to say, in essence, "Father you are as good as dead to me."

Of course, that means that everything that was left in the household was rightfully part of the older brother's inheritance.  
The fatted calf that was killed should have been the older brother's.  
The best robe given to clothe the prodigal,  
the ring placed on his finger,  
the food and wine at the feast —  
all of it, coming from the older brother's inheritance,  
after the younger son had already squandered all of his.

We can empathize with the older brother,  
just as in Genesis we can empathize with the older brother Cain,  
in the story of the first brothers.  
Cain also was a field worker, a tiller of the ground,  
who became indignant when his hard work was not acknowledged  
while his younger brother Abel received all the glorious attention.

In his book, *The Birth Order Handbook*,  
author Kevin Leman explores the interpersonal dynamics learned by children  
in their family of origin  
depending on where they fall in the birth order.  
As an older child himself, Leman admits that he had wanted to title his book,  
"Abel Had It Coming," but his publishers wouldn't let him.

While I, myself, am an only child,  
we only children are said to have the traits of the responsible older child—  
but on steroids.  
Super-responsible, neurotic people-pleasers,  
who are highly indignant when our merit is not fully appreciated  
or when lesser work than ours is given greater reward.  
So I can certainly identify with the Older Brother  
since I easily assign Prodigal Son status to all sorts of people who annoy me.

And by the way, speaking of Cain and Abel,  
if you are troubled by the younger brother, the baby of the family,  
being preferred and praised for no apparently good reason,  
don't bother reading the rest of Genesis,  
where the younger child always seems to be preferred—  
Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Jonathan over his brothers.

So Jesus' hearers, being well versed in the stories of the Old Testament,  
when they hear Jesus begin a story by saying,  
"There was a man who had two sons..."  
already have an idea of what to expect.

But enough of my indignant rant. You can see where my sympathies lie.  
What title would you give to this story?  
If we spent time talking, I'm sure we could come up with even more possibilities.

All of these potential titles  
reveal the power of a parable like this one to work in us and on us  
partly because we almost always locate ourselves in the story  
with one or more of the characters with whom we identify.

Where do you find yourself in this parable?  
Do you feel a connection with the older brother?  
Or the lost son who has received more than he deserves?  
Or the waiting father, watching the gate, longing for his lost son to come home?  
Or the mother, though she is never mentioned,  
only implied perhaps in the "we" of the father's reasoning  
"We had to celebrate and rejoice."  
Or do you connect to this story in some other way?

Or perhaps you mostly feel a revulsion to the story?  
If so, watch out— your revulsion might actually be because  
you recognize yourself  
in the character that makes you the angriest.

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The parable appears in Luke 15  
as the third of three stories about lost things:  
a shepherd loses a sheep,  
a woman loses a coin,  
a father loses a son.  
And in all three stories there is great rejoicing with the lost thing is found.

At the conclusion of the first two, the finder of the lost thing  
*calls together his or her friends and neighbors, saying to them,*  
*"Rejoice with me, for I have found the sheep that I had lost."*  
*"Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."*  
And after each of the first two, Jesus offers the same conclusion:  
*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven*  
*over one sinner who repents*  
*than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.*  
*Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God*  
*over one sinner who repents.'*

So the context matters here:  
that Jesus is telling these stories in response to the Pharisees and the scribes,  
who are grumbling because Jesus is hanging around and eating with  
tax collectors and sinners.

Remember though  
that these Pharisees and scribes are probably the kinds of people  
we would most likely consider respectable religious folks today:

they read their bibles, pray regularly, give alms to the poor  
(even if they do like the recognition they get for it),  
and they are the sort of upstanding productive citizens  
who do what is expected of them,  
just like the Older Brother.

So who is it these days that really gets under your skin?  
Who is it that really ticks you off?  
Who would you have the hardest time forgiving,  
even if they came to you in repentance, admitting they had done wrong?  
That's who this parable is about.

Of course, there is always the possibility that the parable is about you,  
if the person you have the hardest time forgiving is yourself.

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If the parable of these two Lost Sons  
calls us to view these two sons through the eyes of the gracious Father,  
then Paul calls us, as well,  
*to regard no one from a [merely] human point of view.*

For just as the Prodigal is given a new start in the Father's house,  
*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:  
everything old has passed away;  
see, everything has become new!*

*All this is from God, says Paul,  
who reconciled us to himself through Christ,  
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;  
that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,  
not counting their trespasses against them,  
and [get this, all you Older Brothers out there]  
entrusting the message of reconciliation **to us!***

What does this mean for us,  
that *the ministry and message of reconciliation is entrusted to us*  
when we do not— deep in our hearts — want to be reconciled to some people?

Are we like the Older Brother?  
Are we like the prophet Jonah,  
who was so angry at the Ninevites for the atrocities they regularly committed  
and so angry at God for being willing to forgive them  
that Jonah would rather die  
before being involved in that reconciliation.

But if that's the case, if we are **The Responsible but Unforgiving Older Child**  
standing outside and missing the joy of the party  
then who is it who needs to be reconciled?  
Who is it who is lost?

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We still have a long road ahead of us in this season of Lent,  
and there is a lot of story yet to tell in the Gospel of Luke,  
but it may be worth noting that the joy in these passages  
the rejoicing that is done by the community  
when a lost soul is returned to the fold,  
is the same joy with which the Gospel of Luke concludes.

The final two verses of the Gospel of Luke tell of the risen Son, Jesus, returning to the Father:

*While he was blessing them,  
Jesus withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.  
And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;  
and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

When God does what God does,  
when God seeks and finds and saves the lost,  
when Jesus gives sight to the blind and sets the oppressed free,  
joy is the fruit, joy is the end.

And if we can receive the gift of the gospel  
...with as much joy for those we don't like  
...with as much joy for those who we feel have wronged us  
...as for ourselves

**then we are ready to accept the amazing grace of God,  
and that grace will lead us home...**

...or, perhaps...as in the case of The Older Brother,  
that grace  
will help us discover anew  
**the home we never left.**

<sup>1</sup> Don Juel's title, discussed in *Sermon Brainwave* podcast #655 - Fourth Sunday in Lent.