

A sermon preached on Sunday, March 31st, 2019 based upon Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32.

At the outset of this parable, the two brothers seem altogether different. One seems to epitomize responsibility, a good work ethic and respect for his father; the other seems the embodiment of laziness, disrespect, and self-centeredness.

But I want to suggest that when you scratch beneath the surface the two brothers aren't really so different after all. There are three things they have in common.

The first similarity is that they are both altogether clueless regarding the extent in which their father loves them.

The second is this: They are both fundamentally self-centered.

The younger brother's self-centeredness is on full display. How thoughtless, how cruel to ask his father for his share of the inheritance now -- while the father still has lots of life left in him! He's essentially telling his father that he'd prefer he were dead. Wrapped up in himself, he doesn't really have a clue of the pain his actions are causing his father. His self-centeredness involves a hardened heart that blocks the natural compassion a son should have for his Dad.

But the older brother is also self-centered, though his self-centeredness is better disguised. His more socially acceptable form of self-centeredness involves a devotion to an image he has carefully crafted to project to the world: that of goodness, and responsibility and respectability. His ego gets lots of strokes whenever people admire how "good" he is, and this perception of his "goodness" is dependent upon the comparisons people make between him and others -- and in particular his younger brother.

You could say he is the model of perfection, and in that, perfectly self-centered.

If love means freely giving yourself away as a blessing to others, the older brother lacks this capacity. He likes to view himself as a "giver", but his giving always comes with a hidden cost -- a subtle message to everyone he interacts with of "*you owe me.*" He carries around inside his head a ledger sheet that tracks all the good he has done for others, and the good others have done for him, and he makes a point of never being in debt, always having others indebted to him. It leaves him feeling superior, entitled, in control.

It would make him anxious if he found himself in debt to another.

His father gave him life and the farm that is his home and so much more, so he actually *is* in debt to his father, but he is loathe to acknowledge this fact. The elder brother blocks out this indebtedness by not really seeing himself as his father's son; for all

practical purposes he sees himself as his father's "hired hand". The best, hardest working hired hand his father could ever have. *"What would he ever do without me?"*

There is a third way that both brothers are alike: buried underneath their well-fortified self-centeredness is a self that is made in the image of God – a self with a profound capacity to love others *and* to allow love in. It's a self that would have been easy to recognize when they were young as it is with all young children. But overtime their true selves have gotten covered over.

The distinct forms of their self-centeredness sets the two brothers on altogether different journeys, each with its own internal logic.

The elder brother stays home because it is there that he can maintain control and get his ego stroked for the image he projects of goodness, responsibility and perfection. And as the first born son in those days he stands to receive the lion's share of the inheritance.

There is also a logic to the younger brother's leaving. He really can never *"win"* if he stays home on the farm. Ultimately, the farm will never be his. But more than that, he will always fall short in comparison to his brother. Never good enough, never responsible enough, never competent or hard-working enough. So what's the use to hang around and continually come out on the wrong side of the comparison?

Although his leaving home ultimately proves to be a terrible mistake, you have to give the younger brother this: he's willing to take a risk – to launch out into the great unknown – somewhat like Abraham and Sarah before him – trusting that things will work out somehow. You would be right to call it the bravery of a fool, because his immaturity and self-centeredness will lead him to make really poor choices on his journey to the far country.

Nonetheless, perhaps there is in this willingness to take a risk a tiny glimmer of the light that shines forth from that buried self made in the image of God. Because, you see, God is the ultimate risk taker. Creation itself was an enormous risk. The incarnation – God's decision to take the plunge to fully enter this broken creation in human form – that, for sure, was a risky business.

The parable tells us just the bare bones details, so we are left to conjecture, which is one of things I think parables invite us to do.

What did the older brother feel when his younger brother announced his plans to take his inheritance and leave? I'm guessing there was at least a pang of sadness and grief. There is always some mixture of love and hate in the relationships of siblings. Hopefully over time the love prevails over the hate, but there's never a guarantee that this will

happen. As I noted this week in my Lenten scripture postings, there sure are a lot of stories in the Bible of destructive sibling rivalry, going all the way back to Cain killing his brother Abel.

As is the case with all first-borns when a little usurper arrives on the scene, the elder brother must have resented the heck out of his little, screeching baby brother who stole away so much of his parents attention. But it's also safe to assume that over time the elder brother came to love this little brother -- to feel protective of him -- maybe even to have some fun with him, at least when they were both young.

So I'm guessing that the elder brother's heart initially ached when his little brother first announced his intention to leave home. There was a sense of loss arising within him for whatever love had lived within for his brother. And this heart ache -- this sign of his innate capacity for love -- was actually an expression of that buried true self.

But I'm also guessing that the elder brother found this emotion of grief and loss threatening -- it left him feeling out of control and he never liked to feel out of control -- and so quickly the feeling of grief gave way to anger, condemnation, and of course, the oh-so familiar territory of feeling superior. *"I would never do such a thing to our father!"*

So with his brother's cruel departure his status of being the "good" son -- the responsible, respectful son -- will be permanently set in stone, or so he thought. *"My brother left and broke my father's heart. I stayed and did my duty. Can anything be clearer regarding who's 'good' and who's 'bad'?"*

The younger son goes off and squanders his inheritance. The foolish, self-centered choices he makes ends up leaving him penniless and all alone in the world.

He hits the proverbial "rock bottom", although as I said in posts this week there is some ambiguity regarding what exactly is happening at this point. Is he truly remorseful for what he did to his father, or does he simply realize that this father's hired hands have a far better life than he has starving away with the pig poop?

Nonetheless the younger brother has received a great humbling. A crack has occurred in his self-centeredness that can, as the saying goes, let a little light in.

He heads home. Having, as I said at the start, never understood the depths of his father's love for him, he hopes merely to be taken in as a hired hand and the benefit of a roof over his head and three square meals a day. And so the younger brother must have been absolutely astonished when the old man throws respectability to the wind and comes running down the road to give him a big bear hug -- cutting him off before he gets a chance to finish his well-rehearsed speech -- in particular, the part about becoming a "hired hand." The love he never really grasped begins to penetrate his

heart when the new sandals are placed on his bare feet, and a fine robe put around his shoulders and the ring marking him as a son placed upon his finger, and when his father starts making plans for the biggest, blowout party they've ever had on the farm.

Whether we realize it or not, we are all on a spiritual journey, and the goal of this journey is to resurrect that buried true self -- the one made in the image of God -- the one that can give and receive love freely.

Although we would prefer it wasn't so, hard times have an important role to play on this journey. Hitting what is referred to as "rock bottom" in whatever form this takes serves a purpose: it humbles us; it cracks open our de-fault self-centeredness.

Hence, the great spiritual challenge of the elder brother is this: where exactly will "rock bottom" come from when you are already "perfect" -- when it's not in your DNA to go out and mess up royally the way the younger brother did?

Remember, Jesus told this parable and two shorter ones in response to the complaints of the Pharisees regarding the fact that Jesus was partying with the "sinners and tax collectors" -- the younger brothers who have in various ways messed up in life. How will the elder brother/Pharisee let go of his pride, recognize his well-disguised self-centeredness, humble himself and go into the party, hug his long lost brother who was dead but now is a live and join the conga line?

So the parable ends with what *could be* the closest thing the elder brother will come in having a "rock bottom" experience. Maybe in light of the party he's missing out on, he finally acknowledges the fact that his tried and true strategy in life hasn't really worked. That the ledger sheet he has kept running in head has gotten in the way of experiencing what love really is. That all the energy he spent earning his father's love was a wasted, because his father already loved him unconditionally. That his father's love has always been there waiting for him to let it in. That everything that belongs to his father has always belonged to him as well. That he has missed out on joy.

As in last week's parable, once again we both personal accountability, and the necessity of grace, held together in tension.

For the younger brother, the memory of the home he once had with his father and the love he knew there -- unappreciated though it was -- calls to him as (prevenient) grace. But he must decide for himself to get up and make the journey home, where he is astonished to experience the grace of his father's open-hearted welcome home.

Grace and accountability are both present for the elder brother as well. Grace, represented by the Father who cherishes him so coming out into the field like the Good

Shepherd in search of the lost sheep, imploring him to come into the party. But the older brother must decide whether he will accept the gracious invitation.

The choice the younger brother had to make was easier than the one required of the older brother. After all, the younger brother has nothing left to lose.

From the elder brother's point view, there seems as though he has a lot to lose. He has to leave behind the ego-boost he routinely gets by feeling superior to all those who fall short by his standards. He has to let go of his self-righteousness and his impeccable reputation.

The Apostle Paul is a classic example of someone who made elder's brother's journey safely home. As we will read in a passage scheduled for next Sunday – Paul came to realize that in the end all that stuff he had clutched to so tightly really was just so much rubbish – compared, that is to life inside the party – the incredible love revealed in Jesus.

So what about us?

Who do you find yourself identifying with in the story? Most of us, I suspect, myself included, find ourselves identifying with the elder brother.

Will we accept the invitation?

This parable ends open-ended. We must make the choice that determines how the story ends.

We have good reason to believe that in the end, grace will prevail. In the parable of the Good Shepherd that Jesus told immediately before this one – it doesn't say "*if the shepherd finds the lost sheep*". It says, "*when*" the shepherd finds him.

It's just a matter of time before grace will lead us home.

Better sooner than later.

This is as close as he will come to a rock bottom moment – the midlife acknowledgement that the path he has taken isn't working.

He has this ledger sheet he keeps in his head about all the good things he has done that make him better than his younger brother. And he is storing up a lot of money in this bank account. It's just not very satisfying. When his brother leaves, what did he feel? Maybe a pang of sadness from that true self buried inside him – a sign of that buried self. But he buries that sadness, and instead takes advantage of the opportunity his brother has created for him to feel so much more superior.

One hits rock bottom. The possibility for something to happen.

- 1) The fact the story says the path we are on may well seem all wrong; it may seem like we made abysmal choices that led us to a bad place. But the mystery of God's grace is that God will lead us home. Something deeply comforting. As much as we are programmed to look at life as being about becoming successful (that's how we look at our kids) the gospel implies there are more important things. And sometimes wrong choices are necessary to learn from.**
- 2) The Good Shepherd story (and lost coin story) and when he/she finds it... God who is pursuing us.**
- 3) What if what we think life is about isn't what it's really about at all? Last week the subject came up about what do bad things happen? Mystery. The only way belief in a loving God and bad things happening can make any sense is if on a basic level we are generally out of touch with what life is about. We think it is about getting what we want, comfort, never experiencing loss. But what if life is about becoming a vessel of God's love, pure and simple. The major blockage to that love is our ego.**
- 4) 7 year old boy, he realizes these basic things about life – that babies are born to parents who are supposed to love them – a great rage arises within him. He turns it on his adoptive parents. He looks at them and he doesn't see love, he sees annoyance, he sees somebody who won't let him do whatever he wants, who won't leave him alone. By sheer persistence, and this therapy that requires that the boy be in his mother's presence full time, something happens.**
- 5) The parallel here is that neither of the brothers realize how much they are loved.**

- 6) The this American life story about a child from Romanian and how hard it was to make that attachment, and somewhere along the way with the mother's dogged persistence, it clicked. That what he was programmed somehow to see as his mother's great frustration of him turned out to be her love.
- 7) That at the outset, the elder brother is just as self-centered as the younger brother. For the benefit of how life on this earth works, it is a much more preferable self-centeredness, but it is just as rock solid as his little brother's. It involves his image of himself as the "Good son." The responsible one. He compares himself to others, and he gets his kudos. In fact in a perverse way he needs his younger brother so he can come off looking good.
- 8) Somehow the hard shell of that ego-centered life has to get cracked open. It is a foolish choice the younger son makes, but to his credit, it is some daring involved in his move. (Maybe one of the reasons the younger brother leaves home is that the elder brother has the market cornered on being "good" – he'll always fall short. So he might as well launch forth.)
- 9) Being in control.
- 10) The peculiar phenomenon that when horrible things happen – 9/11 – even as we are given a glimpse of evil, we are also given a glimpse of what we can become. The ego stuff doesn't matter.
- 11) We see no one from a human point of view.
- 12) Mark Miller – saw him as the bratty child of the camp director, didn't even know he was in to music.

Thursday, March 28

Yesterday, we read about the two opposing understanding of holiness and how the Holiness Code led the scribes and Pharisees to condemn Jesus for seeking out the company of "tax collectors and sinners." For Jesus this was a "teaching moment" as they say.

Our reading skips over two shorter parables. Both involve something lost, that is then found and the rejoicing that ensued, in one instance a woman who finds a coin she lost somewhere in her house and in the other a Good Shepherd who goes to great lengths to seek out and find one lost sheep.

Then Jesus proceeded with a third parable:

Luke 15:11- 24

So (Jesus) told them this parable:

"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 traveled 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.

It is hard for us to grasp, just how deeply offensive what the younger son has done, in the context of ancient Jewish culture. In asking for his share of the inheritance, before his father's death, the son is declaring that he would essentially prefer his father be dead.

The son squanders his inheritance on a hedonistic binge, so with no remaining inheritance, there really isn't any possibility of making amends for his initial cruelty towards his father. He ends up in at "rock bottom" accentuated in Jesus' telling by the fact, that the only job he can get is tending to pigs – a ritually unclean animals for Jews.

Jesus tells his tale, at this point, in a way that is somewhat ambiguous. Starving to death, Jesus tells us the young man "*came to himself.*" What does that mean? Is this a sign of true remorse, or Is this just a pragmatic assessment of the fact that back on his father's farm the hired hands are eating better, than he is in the far country.

He comes up with a plan and rehearses a speech, he will make to his father. Does he mean what he is saying, or is this just a calculated attempt to appeal to his father's mercy?

It is interesting, that Jesus doesn't make this obvious. The significance of this is that, in our usual way of seeing things we want to believe, that the son was truly remorseful and as a result the father forgave him.

But that's not what the father's actions indicate. *"But while (the son) was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."* The impression we have is that through the months and years the father has been keeping watch, hoping one day to see him returning home, and that now with his homecoming the father isn't particularly interested in hearing the son's well-rehearsed speech. The father is focused on throwing a big party to celebrate the son's return.

It would have been shocking for Jesus' listeners to hear of a father behaving this way. *"Where is your sense of dignity, man? Considering what your son's done, you shouldn't even allow him to return home. If you decide you must allow him to come back home, punish him severely. Make sure he grovels before you for a good long time. And for God's sake don't run to him, exposing your bare heels. It's okay for mothers, to do that sort of thing, but not a proud Jewish father!"*

So it's kind of crazy. So here's a question: returning home, is the son a changed man? We want to believe so, and there is good reason for this hope since at the end, the son is in the "party." The "party" is a metaphor for the Kingdom of God.

Nonetheless, the one absolutely clear thing in the story is how the father feels about this son. He's wildly, crazily in love with him.

So, if the Father represents God, what's that tell us?

I didn't come up with this parable; Jesus did. Are we sure we want to be following this guy?

Friday, March 29

Today, we continue Jesus' parable commonly known as that of the "prodigal son". In the last part of the story, the younger brother fades to the background and the elder son and father take center stage.

Luke 15:25-32

"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.'"

Have you noticed how often sibling rivalry shows up in the Bible? Way back in the fourth chapter of Genesis there's Cain and Abel, followed soon afterwards with Jacob and Esau and then Joseph and his brothers. Last week, we heard about two brothers arguing over inheritance, and then Martha getting angry with her younger sister Mary. And now we have these two brothers.

Maybe there is a suggestion in all these stories that if we can work our way through our sibling rivalries to reconciliation, we will find our way to God. In our parable the Father is a stand-in for God, and he is imploring the elder brother to be reconciled to his brother.

I have always been struck by the way the parable ends. There's this incredible party going on with feasting and music and dancing. Apparently, the father had been there but he'd been troubled by the absence of his elder son, so he leaves the party to go search for him. *(In those days a well-to-do father should have been able to send a servant out with the message: "Your Dad says get your butt into the party NOW!" There is an echo here of the Father running out to meet the wayward younger son's homecoming.)*

The elder brother is seething with what many of us would find to be an understandable anger, complaining that a party was never thrown for him. Lashing out at his father (God?), he refers to *"this son of yours"*, refusing to acknowledge, any longer his own kinship to his younger brother.

Imploring his son to come into the party the father says in essence that he could have had a party anytime he wanted. The father firmly defends the appropriateness of the party, *"because this brother of yours"* (he won't let his older son's disavowal of his brother stand) *"was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."*

That's how it ends -- the invitation to go into the party, hanging in the air. Will he, or won't he go into the party? It is as if Jesus, intentionally, left the story unfinished with the implication that we have to decide for ourselves in our own lives how the story ends.

Once again, this parable emphasizes how God values our freedom. Just as the father, wouldn't force the younger brother to stay home on the farm, neither will the father compel the older brother to go into the party.

It's as if the elder son is in a prison cell with the door wide open, but it's up to him to decide whether he will step forth from that prison cell.

How would you describe the nature of the elder brother's bondage?

Who do you find yourself resonating with in the parable? The younger brother? The elder brother? The father?

Saturday, March 30

Our reading today is from one of Paul's letters, in this case to the church of Corinth where people were divided up into separate, competing groups.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

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, 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 entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

What defines us as people? The person we once were, or the person we are becoming?

Paul celebrates the good news of the God he knows in Jesus Christ -- a God in the process of making "*a new creation*." Paul himself is evidence of this new creation. Once he was a hate-filled persecutor of the first Christians, trying to win his salvation by works of the law; by God's grace he has become the primary apostle to the Gentiles. Elsewhere, he acknowledges he has not yet arrived, the implication being that his old, self-centered, embittered self, re-emerges along the journey. But having tasted the freedom of what he calls "*the glorious liberty of the children of God*" he seeks to know it more deeply and in that freedom, to be the person God made him to be: a vessel of God's love.

In the parable, we've been considering this week, we see in the homecoming of the younger brother and his astonishment at his Father's graceful reception, the dawning of a new creation. The younger brother is becoming the person he was always meant to be.

Apparently, the Father had always believed in this possibility. He has seen underneath his son's self-centeredness and his pig-trough stench something worthy of redemption.

The elder brother however, continues to see his younger sibling, as Paul says "*from a human point of view*." Through his eyes his younger brother remains the selfish brat who squandered his inheritance.

When we others this way -- defined by the worst self they once presented to the world -- we impose a kind of outward bondage that can be hard for others to break out of, especially in relation to ourselves. God calls us to be a part of "*the ministry of reconciliation*" in which we see people in terms of who God is calling them to become. To be a part of this ministry, we have to recognize others as being -- at the very deepest level -- our siblings in God's family.

Sure, this can be really hard sometimes. But it begins by trying to see ourselves as God sees us. It begins with inward liberation.

In the parable, the elder son hasn't been able to take in the depth of the love his father has for him. He prefers to see his relationship to his father as a ledger-sheet interaction: "*You love me because I have dutifully fulfilled responsibilities around the farm*." Strangely, he sees himself not as a son, but as his father's hired hand -- one who -- with his brother's return -- has been short-shifted in his pay.

What does the elder brother get out of this? The perverse pleasures of feeling entitled, to look down on others with self-righteous anger. It isn't worth it, however. He is missing out on a great party (the kingdom of God) which apparently is always open for him to enter when he'd ready to humble himself.

The parable ends, with his father's refusal to believe that his elder son is destined to remain trapped in the prison cell of his hard-heartedness. He seeks to reconcile his

elder son to his younger son, but also to the buried true self – what will be experienced as a new self – the self that God has always intended him to be. A self that isn't stuck in a ledger-sheet view of life. One who can receive love, as a gift and give it as a gift.

Where in your life, is it hard to avoid seeing people from, as Paul says, “*a human point of view?*”

Where in your life do you find yourself stuck in a ledger-sheet relationship?