

“Celebration or Grumbling?”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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Last month, I was reviewing this Sunday’s lectionary texts to decide what I wanted to preach on this morning. I looked at the Gospel text. Oh, it’s the prodigal son. Been there, done that. Everyone knows that text in and out. There’s gotta be something more intriguing in one of the other texts. I don’t want to preach on the prodigal son.

I had to agree with the preacher who wrote “It is difficult for us to see something new in the parable of the Prodigal son. We have heard the story so many times we believe that we have squeezed it dry of meaning. When we hear the opening words of the parable once again, ‘And there was a Father who had two sons,’ we greet the words with ho-hum. Heard it. Heard it. Heard it.”¹ So I began to work with the other texts from today’s lectionary.

Fast forward a couple of days. Bill stops by my office. Can you see where this is heading? We start talking about our sermon plans for March. Bill says, “Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. The week you’re preaching, the Maple Grove Players are doing an interpretation of the prodigal son text, so you’d better go with that one.”

So now I was stuck with the story of the prodigal son. What new information can I get from this story that is probably the most recognized parable in all of the Bible? When I thought about it in this way, it became a challenge, and I’m always up for a challenge!

Henri Nouwen once spent some time viewing Rembrandt’s painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting was in a hallway and received the natural light of a nearby window. Nouwen stood for two hours, mesmerized by this remarkable painting. As he stood there the sun changed, and at every change of the light’s angle he saw a different aspect of the painting revealed. He would later write: “There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day.”

As I studied the parable of the prodigal son this week, I began to see the various nuances of the story, and I realized that it really does have a number of different things to tell us. And so the challenge became picking just one of the elements of the story in order to keep my sermon under a half an hour. You’re welcome.

One of the first things that I noticed about today’s scripture lesson is that it includes the first three verses of the chapter. In those three verses, we find out the setting where Jesus told the parable. Jesus is eating with sinners and tax collectors, and the Pharisees are grumbling about it. It made me realize that the parables Jesus told were in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees.

¹ www.esermons.com, “Illustrations for March 14, 2010 (CLE4) Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 by Our Staff”

I've always understood the parable of the prodigal son to be mainly about the younger son and his relationship with his father. The older son in the parable always felt like somewhat of an add-on to the story – not the main part. However, when I looked at the parable as a response to the grumbling of the Pharisees, it made me realize that the response of the older son is the primary point that Jesus is trying to highlight. The parable could be more about the older son than it is the younger son.

I think what Jesus was saying in this parable is that both brothers had an issue of sin. We tend to focus on the younger brother because his sins are more obvious. We like to point at the obvious sinners of the world, don't we? The criminals, the prostitutes, the greedy - we look at them and say something like, "At least I'm not like that!" And yet, the truth is that we're all sinners.

If you don't believe me, think about this. God was recently looking down at Earth and noticing all of the bad behavior that was going on. So God called the angel Michael and sent him to Earth to check things out. When Michael returned, he told God, 'Yes, it is bad on Earth; 95% are misbehaving and only 5% are not. God thought for a moment and said, 'Maybe I had better send a second angel down to get another opinion.' So God sent Gabriel to Earth. When Gabriel returned he went to God and said, 'Yes, it's true. The Earth is in decline; 95% are misbehaving, but 5% are being good.' God was not pleased and decided to send a note to the 5% who were good, to encourage them and give them a little something to help them keep going. Do you know what the note said? I'd really like to know because I didn't get one. I guess you didn't get one either!

The fact is that we all sin. We all do things that separate us from God. For most of us though, our sin is not like the sin of the younger brother. I think most of us are more like the older brother, so I'd like to focus on his role in the story this morning.

During Jesus' time, society placed a high degree of importance on the issues of honor and shame. When the older brother refused to go the banquet that his father threw for the younger brother, it would have shown tremendous disrespect for the father in Jesus' day. It would have brought tremendous shame to the father. The older brother made his father come out from the party to beg him to come into the party. Fathers in those days didn't go out and beg their sons to join them, they simply said what they wanted their sons to do and the sons did it. It was complete disrespect to make your father come and beg you to do something. You can begin to see the distance between the older brother and his father.

Then the older brother says, "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you." Do you hear that? The son clearly doesn't do anything for the father out of love, he does it out of obligation, like a slave, with an apparent chip on his shoulder. The older brother's attitude shows that his years of obedience to his father had been years of grim duty and not of loving service. There is no joy in the older brother.

I think what Jesus was trying to point out in this parable is that there are two vastly different ways we can respond to God. The younger son realized that he couldn't do it all on his own, that the only way he could have a relationship with his father is through the grace of the father. He didn't deserve anything. On the other hand, the older brother felt he had earned it all. He deserved a party because he had been so good. He had no need for grace. And yet, his indignation and unwillingness to celebrate with his father still created distance between them.

The elder brother represents all of us who think we can make it on our own, all of us who might be proud of the kind of lives we live. It highlights the contrast between those who want to live by justice and merit and those who must ask for grace. The parable shows that those who would live by merit can never know the joy of grace. We cannot share in the Father's grace if we demand that he deal with us according to what we deserve.²

The younger brother was prepared to live entirely by grace. The elder brother lived only by obedience. Which one is the slave?

Henri Nouwen once commented on the "lostness" of both sons in the story of the Prodigal Son. He wrote, "Did you ever notice how lost you are when you are resentful? It's a very deep lostness. The younger son gets lost in a much more spectacular way — giving in to his lust and his greed, using women, playing poker, and losing his money. His wrongdoing is very clear-cut. He knows it and everybody else does, too. Because of it he can come back, and he can be forgiven. The problem with resentment is that it is not so clear-cut: It's not spectacular. And it is not overt, and it can be covered by the appearance of a holy life. Resentment is so harmful because it sits very deep in you, in your heart, in your bones, and in your flesh, and often you don't even know it is there. You think you're so good. But in fact you are lost in a very profound way."³

At the end of the story, the father responds to the older son by saying, "All that is mine is yours." What he's saying to the older son is basically, "You haven't lost anything, so why are you acting that way?" Why do we so often treat things as if they are win/lose situations? Making things win/lose only leads to resentment on the part of the loser.

It's a shame that our society is so good at making everything into a win/lose scenario. Just look at the big national issues of the day, whether they be healthcare, foreign policy or taxes. We always find a way to frame the argument in terms of who wins and who loses rather than trying to find a solution that works for everyone.

Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they had finally been defeated and returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner

² R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in The New Interpreter's Bible, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, P. 305.

³ Henri Nouwen, *From Fear to Love: Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son*, (Fenton, Missouri: Creative Communications for the Parish, 1998), 13-14.

expected that Lincoln would take a dire vengeance, but he answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." Can you imagine that happening in today's political world?

My guess is that there is something going on in one of your personal relationships that fits this win/lose scenario as well. Do you have a relationship where you are like the older brother, deeply resentful for a perceived wrong that has been done, even though you really haven't lost anything? How might we be able to re-frame those relationships in a more positive way?

The good news from this parable is that God's love is not about winning or losing. God's love is always about both/and not either/or. God's love is demonstrated by the father in the parable – that father who is willing to endure the shame of both of his sons because he loves them both so very much.

The parable leaves us with the question of whether the elder brother joined the celebration. It doesn't answer that question. I think this is where we find the invitation to Christian discipleship from this text. Did the older brother go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting and feeling wronged? I think the parable ends there because that is the decision each of us must make. If we go in, we accept grace as the Father's rule for life in the family, but we have the choice of staying outside of the party and wallowing in our resentment.⁴

In this season of Lent, this season when we are called to focus on that which separates us from God, let us spend some time looking at ourselves and asking the tough questions. Do we live in God's grace, or do we feel a sense of entitlement to God's love because of our good works? In what ways are our older-brother issues of resentment are keeping us from experiencing the fullness of God's love? Are we going to join the celebration, or stand outside grumbling?

⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in The New Interpreter's Bible, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, P. 305.