

Sermon: The Prodigal Father
Scripture: Luke 15:11-32
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: March 6, 2016

I am the youngest son of 4 children in my family. I am convinced that youngest children go one of two ways in responding to the fact that their parents are exhausted from the children who came before them. Youngest children are either intense, rowdy, and head-strong to get the attention they want or they are mellow, laid back, and operate quietly behind the scenes, because what else ya gonna do? Youngest children have fewer photos and less attention and looser rules because of their place in the order of siblings. I was a child who watched my three siblings ahead of me and said "I'm just going to go along to get along here and that's how I'll get what I need" while our youngest is a child who says "no way, you better pay attention to me, darn it!" And that's how she gets what she needs. Good for her, I say, because I was an overlooked, dismissed, unseen youngest child and she is not.

Now my siblings - Ann, David, and Emily - scoff at this claim of mine, that I was overlooked and unnoticed as a child. "Oh, give me a break," they say, "you were a beloved last child who could do no wrong and who got everything you ever wanted! You're not laid-back because you got no attention and were overlooked, you are laid back because you got everything you wanted and needed and mom and dad loved you the best!" They are completely wrong of course and just don't understand... which is my lot as the youngest, never really understood! Only you youngest children out there know the truth of what I say. Raise your hands if you are the youngest. Yeah, there we go. Maybe we should have a special gathering for support with one another. It's a trying existence!

Although joining us in our support group you know would be the youngest son in Jesus' parable for today. He's kind of a punk and a dead beat but he's colorful and at least we could leave our eldest siblings with the older brother in their support group. He's the one who really comes off looking bad in the story, resentful of his father's graciousness and everything! You never loved me like you loved him... and all that jazz. Although Ann, my eldest sister does give me pause in

considering the older brother in this story because she often is the truth teller of our family, calling it like it is, and she's always taken the heat for that as well. So my love for her gets me to stop and listen a little more carefully to the older brother here.

We assume that the younger brother has something of a conversion experience so many of us listeners appreciate him, don't we or at least cut him some slack? He's kind of wild, crazy, excessive, flamboyant and in the end repentant which is just more appealing than the tight fastidious seething presence of the older brother. But if you consider the story closely you realize that the younger brother really is as much if not more of a jerk than the older brother... despite his being the youngest. The scholar and writer Richard Swanson points out some important but often missed aspects of the story.

Notice that in telling the story that Jesus does not call the turn around for the younger brother a moment of repentance from his prodigal ways, but rather Jesus says when he realizes his straights he "he comes to himself". Now it depends on what kind of guy he is as to whether or not "coming to himself" is a good or bad thing and pretty quickly we learn which it is. He comes to himself and says not "I am such a bad guy, I want to change" but rather he says "how many of my father's servants have bread enough and to spare." Swanson says that a better translation of the Greek actually would be to read "how many of my father's servants not only have enough bread but too much bread!" That's him coming to himself, which is apparently a realization that the servants couldn't possibly deserve more than he does... and this despite his having sold out his father for dead and wasted all his money!

Then remember how he rehearses his speech for his father. "This is what I'll say when I see him." The New Testament scholar Donald Juel suggests we should take particular note of that and consider what older siblings have often said about their younger siblings that they've had the advantage of watching, waiting, and learning from those ahead of them so that they are masters at manipulating their parents to get what they want (as a youngest child, I have no idea what he's talking about!). So the younger son knows his father well, the one who just gave him his inheritance early, and he knows that his father could never abide by his son being

treated like his servants no matter what he did. So the younger son sits back and says “yeah, I know what I’ll say, I’ll tell him I would be sooooo grateful even to be treated like one of his servant!” Oh give me a break. He was just resenting the servants a moment ago. If his father had said “ok, fine, come on back but you stay in the servant quarters and eat what they eat” I imagine the younger son would have been like “darn it! That is not what I was expecting!”

But the point is this: the younger brother obviously has not changed but is as self-serving and egotistical as he has always been and even in his coming home he has worked the situation to get the most out of it for himself. In fact to the older brother’s credit, I think he’s seeing the situation pretty clearly and we can probably imagine that a week or two down the road that manipulative little brother of his is going to be as troublesome as ever around the place and the father will have been taken advantage of one more time!

So there’s a more accurate account of the story don’t you think? It’s far too neat and tidy to suggest that the father’s extravagant welcome touched the younger son’s heart and created an outpouring of gratitude and life-change that led him to be much less self-absorbed and morally transformed. But it doesn’t say that’s what happened in the story. It is a story less about the prodigal son and more about a prodigal father, a father whose love was extravagant, even wasteful, and offered to everybody despite their deserving. The Father’s love was offered not because of the worthiness of the recipient, nor because of the effect that it might have on them but because that is who the Father is and that is what the Father does – he forgives one more time, actually 70X7 more times, because that is the nature of God and that is the amazing reality of grace. Of course the older brother doesn’t get it. Who would?! Of course the younger brother takes advantage of such grace, who wouldn’t?! But either way God is love and love flows freely and without condition. And IF we could look further into time in the story, we might find the very next scene is the younger brother snickering behind his father’s back as he watches the older brother walk away, and the Father get’s what is coming to him – heartbreak. Heartbreak at the loss of his eldest son and heartbreak at the mean-spiritedness of his youngest son, despite all he’s given.

But that is the strangest and most amazing thing that the Christian faith teaches, something that we should all just stop and meditate on for a while because it is so bizarre and mysterious – our faith tradition teaches that God is all heart and in this world hearts are broken and so God, the Creator of All That Is can be broken, God can be wounded, God suffers. What?!! This is what I am saying, it is an unimaginably strange claim that is so far out there it's either completely insane or completely true. The cross means nothing if the cross does not reveal that God loves and suffers for this love and in our suffering and our loving we too are drawn up into God. God runs out of the house to meet us on the road, so full of love is God's heart, and we can betray Him and resent Him and try and manipulate Him and misunderstand and ignore Him and walk away from Him and still God runs out of the house arms wide open loving us and everyone else in this insane way! Praise be to our crazy prodigal God!

Invitation to Communion

This table is a table of the Broken Heart. Jesus, God incarnate, is broken at the hands of a fearful, selfish, confused world, like the breaking of bread and the spilling of a cup. And we are invited to receive the pieces and through us God is healed and made whole again and through God we are healed and made whole again. So you are welcome to this table of brokenness, this table of love. Whether you are a youngest child or an eldest one...even if you are a middle child, you are welcome here. Wherever you are on life's journey, wherever you find yourself in your walk of faith God comes out to you with arms wide open saying come take and drink, all that I have is yours! Amen.