

Sermon – A Parent’s Dilemma

Scripture Readings– Genesis 33:1-10, Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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Our first scripture is found in Genesis 33:1-10. This is the story of Jacob’s homecoming and first meeting with his brother Esau. Twenty-one years had passed since Jacob deceived their father Isaac into giving him the birthright that belonged to Esau as firstborn. Jacob feared revenge from his brother but instead found favor and forgiveness. This is the word of God.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ² He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³ He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. ⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” ⁶ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. ⁸ Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor with my lord.” ⁹ But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” ¹⁰ Jacob said, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Luke 15:1-3, 11-32. Here we read a familiar parable about the homecoming of a young man. The rituals and celebrations that followed and the dilemma this presented his overjoyed father. Hear now, God’s holy word.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. "So he 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. "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.' "

The title of the sermon: A Parent's Dilemma

Text: Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons.' Luke 15:11

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us a deeper understanding of how you can love each of us as if there was no other and yet love all of us. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen

Stories, told well, have a way of touching our hearts and bringing truths home to us, especially truths about ourselves. Jesus was a sensitive and gifted storyteller. *The Prodigal Son* is a parable about a homecoming, but it is also a story about a family, stirring different feelings within us, depending on where we fall in our own families.

Studies in psychology suggest birth order does play a role in a child's personality. Parents have different expectations and wishes each time a child is born. The oldest child may deal with feelings of displacement more than once, something the youngest child never experiences. The middle child often feels sandwiched in-between and overlooked.

In the patriarchal culture of our Bible, tradition dictated that the oldest son received the inheritance. This is the conflict between Jacob and Esau and played a role in the parable of the prodigal son as well. Daughters are rarely mentioned by name in the Bible. They had no birthright.

You and I live in a different world today. Democracy maintains that freedom is a birthright. There is more equality and opportunity among siblings within families. Yet, we each have the secret wish to be *the only* and *the most beloved* child of our parents. Years ago, when our dad was alive, my sister Becky and I had a ritual during our weekly phone calls with him. When he asked, "Who is this?" we each replied, "It's your favorite daughter!" Fortunately, our dad had good voice recognition. Although it was a joke among us, there was a truth in our wish.

Once we have children of our own, we can better sympathize with the parents' dilemma of wanting each of their children to feel special and loved and for their children to be able to accept and love each other—a dilemma we see in the Prodigal Son. On the one hand, the parable explores the family dynamics among two brothers and a father. On the other hand, it describes the relationships among members of the Judeo-Christian tradition during the first century of the Christian era to reveal the nature of the God Jesus called father.

One theological interpretation of the story is that the "younger, favored son" represents the sinners and tax collectors whom Jesus welcomed, and the "older, resentful son" represents the hierarchy of the religious community.

Another interpretation is that the "older brother" represents the ongoing Jewish community, and the "younger brother" represents the Gentile Christian community, both children of God, both living in the household of God, and both needing to recognize and affirm the other's presence and unique relationship to the father.

Perhaps both these interpretations put more emphasis on identifying the sons. Perhaps Jesus was more concerned with the character of the father and his dilemma raising two sons, both struggling to come into their own as human beings and both doing it in their own way. Why

does either son need to be criticized? Does this father criticize his sons or have we, the interpreters, placed blame depending on our point of view?

The father doesn't criticize his younger son when he asked for his share of the inheritance to explore the unknown world beyond their home. According to Jewish tradition, his share as the second born was one third. Birth order had already dealt him a disadvantage, and rather than stay at home in the shadow of his older brother, he moved on. Perhaps it was his naïveté that caused him to be overgenerous and irresponsible leading to his poverty...and who among us in difficult times does not find our way home?

No, rather than criticize, the father embraces his younger son and begins the rituals to celebrate his homecoming, a robe, a ring, and sandals on his feet. Any parent understands the joy and gratitude within this father's heart. However, this father does not only embrace his younger son. When he gets word that his older son is angry and refuses to come in, he goes out to entreat him. Luke says he sought him earnestly. The father understands his resentment and hurt feelings. Who among us cannot identify with this dutiful son's point of view, who has spent his life working by his father's side? Surely, he had dreams of exploring the world but chose to make sacrifices for his father and now he's wondering why. The father listens to his son's feelings and then gently reaffirms his love and reminds him of all they have shared together over the years—something no one can take from them—not even his younger brother. Then the father tries to explain to his oldest that for him to love his younger brother and rejoice at his return does not negate the love he has for his firstborn.

And so, we find in this parable, in this “gospel within the gospel,” a profound understanding about the nature of God. This is not about a God who shows favoritism and elitism. This is about a parent who loves both his sons. And this, my friends, is a celebration for the whole family of God. We no longer need to seek being the favored son or daughter. Our religion need not be competitive or elitist. In fact, this is the antithesis of who our God has been revealed to be in Jesus Christ.

Each of us has a place in our Creator's heart. There is no longer one birthright but many blessings. And nothing would be more pleasing to our God than a greater wideness in our mercy toward one another, that we might embrace our brothers and sisters who also belong to God.

Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons.” Amen.