

Whose Son? Whose Brother?

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming close to [Jesus] to listen to him. But both the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling. They said, “He welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable.

A certain man had two sons. Now, the younger one said to their father, “Father, give me my share of the [family] wealth.” So he divided his assets between them. Not many days later, the younger son liquidated everything and went away to a distant country. There he lived recklessly and squandered his wealth.

After he spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country. He began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He wanted to fill up on the pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him [anything]. Then he came to himself and said, “How many of my father’s hired workers have plenty of food, and here I am dying because of a famine! I’ll get up, go to my father, and tell him, ‘I have sinned against heaven and against you. I don’t deserve to be called your son any more. Make me like one of your hired workers.’” So he got up and went to his father.

When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. He was moved with compassion. And he ran and hugged him and kissed him. The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I don’t deserve to be called your son any more.” But the father said to his servant, “Quick! Bring the best robe, and put it on him. Give him a ring for his hand and sandals for his feet. Bring the fattened calf, and slaughter it. Let’s eat and have a party! Because this son of mine was dead, but he’s alive again. He was lost, but he’s been found!” And they started partying.

Now, his older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called for one of the servants and asked what all this was. He told him, “It’s because your brother has come. Your father has slaughtered the fattened calf, because he has him back [alive and] well.” He got angry, and did not want to go inside. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

He answered his father this way: “Look! I have served you all these years without violating your instructions, and you never gave me [so much as] a young goat so I could party with my friends. But when this son of yours comes, the one who devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughter the fattened calf for him!” Then he said to him, “Child, you are always with me, and everything that’s mine is yours. But we had to party, we had to be happy. Because this brother of yours was dead, but he’s alive. He was lost, but he’s been found.”

Children’s Story

Years ago Sammy the Squirrel’s older brother Sylvester did some terrible things to their father, things that shamed their father, things that embarrassed him in front of the neighbors, things better left unsaid. Then Sylvester left home and went far away. That was the last his family saw of him for a long, long time. That was the last anyone saw of Sylvester the Squirrel — until the day he came home.

At first no one was sure who he was. But there were some who recognized him. There were some who remembered. And they started to whisper. They whispered his name. They whispered his story. They whispered the part that was better left unsaid. And they frowned. No one wanted to see that kind of squirrel coming home. Not after what he had done to his father.

No one wanted to see him. No one at all. No one except his father. No matter how Sylvester had hurt him, his father still loved him. Sylvester was his son. Nothing could ever change that. And when Sylvester came near, his father ran out to him, hugged him and kissed him, and welcomed him home. He was happy to have his son back at last. So happy that he threw a party. And the whispering stopped. And the Great Forest was filled with laughter and singing.

Sermon

It's one of the best-known and most-loved of Jesus' parables. We call it "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." And no wonder. The younger son, the prodigal, is at the center of the story. All the action in the story revolves around him, and he figures in all the dramatic tension of the story. It's the younger son, the prodigal, who goes missing. And he, of course, is the one who returns. And it's the younger son, the prodigal, that the father and the older son fight about. So, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" is as good a name as any for this story, I suppose.

What I first learned about this story was mostly about that young, prodigal son. He was an iconic example of sinful humanity. His story revealed how far we all had fallen away from God. And his journey back illustrated the path we all need to take: to come to our senses, to come back to God, and to come clean before God. And then the angels would rejoice (see Luke 15:7,10). That's how I first read the parable.

Then I learned a more sophisticated approach to the story. Helmut Thielicke called it "The Parable of the Waiting Father." Thielicke saw the father as the main character in the parable, as the center of the parable. And not without reason. It's the father who loses his younger son. It's the father who waits for him and looks for him to come home. It's the father who welcomes his wandering son with hugs and kisses and complete reconciliation. And, of course, it's the father who does his best to draw in his older son, in order to restore the entire family. That was the heart of a more sophisticated approach to the parable we know and love so well, "The Parable of the Waiting Father."

Then I discovered a more careful and culturally-aware reading of the parable. With Kenneth Bailey's help, I saw how extraordinary the father in the story is. He broke all the social rules of propriety and dignity to welcome his son home and to reintegrate him into the family and the village. The father humbled himself, emptied himself, made himself nothing, for the sake of reconciliation. Men did not show their legs, not men of standing, and they certainly did not run. But this father hitched up his robes to run toward his returning son. And no father would throw his arms around a son who had wished him dead, which is what the younger son's initial request amounted to. ("Father, I can't wait for you to be dead; give me my share of the family property now.") Yet this father did all that. And he threw a party besides. Extraordinary! Bailey helped me to see this.

But there's even more to this brief story. I think the heart of the story is the interaction between the father and his older son. Some echoes of the Book of Exodus give an important clue about that.

At one point during his jousting with Moses, Pharaoh of Egypt says, "I have sinned against the LORD and against you" (Exodus 10:16). In the parable, the younger son uses the same language for his prepared speech to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and against you." ("Heaven" was the proper, pious euphemism for God's name.) So hearing Jesus tell the story, we are reminded of the Book of Exodus. That prepares us for the exchange between the father and the older son.

First the father had said, "This son of mine was dead, but he's alive again." This son of mine. Next the older son says, "This son of yours . . . who devoured your assets with prostitutes!" This son of yours. Finally the father says, "This brother of yours was dead, but he's alive." This brother of yours. "This son of mine; this son of yours; this brother of yours." The language is reminiscent of the exchange between the LORD and Moses, when Israel had sinned by worshipping the golden calf. The LORD said to Moses, "Your people, whom you brought out of Egypt, have become corrupt" (Exodus 32:7). Then Moses said to the LORD, "Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt . . . ?" (v. 11).

The question between the LORD and Moses was: "Whose people are they anyhow?" The question in the parable, the question between the father and the older son, is: "Whose son is that prodigal anyhow? And whose brother?"

The father had welcomed his younger, prodigal son completely. He had embraced him without hesitation. He had done everything necessary to reintegrate him into the family and the village. "Bring the best robe, and put it on him!" That invested the son with dignity. "Give him a ring for his hand!" That invested him with authority. "And sandals for his feet!" Those sandals marked him not as a slave or a hired

worker, but as a son. “Let’s have a party!” That party gathered together the whole village (that’s why the fattened calf was slaughtered; it was to be a big party) to ratify the restored status of the younger son.

The question of the parable, the question behind the “this son of mine; this son of yours; this brother of yours” exchange, is: “Will the older son embrace as a brother the one whom the father embraces as a son?” That is the question.

Do you remember why Jesus told this story? “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming close to [Jesus] to listen to him. But both the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling” (vv. 1-2a). Jesus was welcoming sinners. He was eating with them. He wasn’t keeping an appropriate, pious distance from them. He wasn’t insisting that they mend their ways before any hugs and kisses were exchanged. The Pharisees and the scribes were aghast. It just wasn’t done, not by a legitimate rabbi! Israel was chosen to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). And the kingdom would not come without holiness. Yet here Jesus was, flouting the requirement for holiness in his associations.

We usually think the problem with the Pharisees was this. They thought that they were righteous and no one else was. But that wasn’t the problem really. The problem was this. The Pharisees cherished their own notions of what the kingdom was and how it would come. And they failed to see and to welcome the kingdom when it was coming right before their eyes! Here Jesus was, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And here were people, the people most in need of grace, flocking to Jesus and being welcomed by him. Because of this, as Jesus put it, the angels in heaven were rejoicing. His implicit question for the Pharisees and the scribes was, “Why aren’t you? The angels in heaven are rejoicing, why aren’t you?” Put another way and in terms of the parable, “Will you not embrace as brother or sister the one God embraces as daughter or son?”

Jesus was challenging the Pharisees and the scribes to see themselves in the parable. I think that challenge continues today for the heirs of the Pharisees and the scribes, wherever they’re found.

How, for example, do we American citizens respond to immigrants who haven’t jumped through all the proper hoops? Will we simply reject people who don’t have the “righteous” status afforded by the proper documents? And if this sounds too political for you and not religious enough, then how about this? It escaped my notice at the time, but a few years ago some Christian Reformed Churches, our sister congregations, had some questions for our denominational synod: “Should we welcome illegal immigrants in our churches? Should we maybe not welcome them to the table? (They are law-breakers, after all.)” I think the parable has something to say to those questions.

Here’s another one. I know a church in Michigan that has struggled over whether or not to welcome, and how to welcome, a registered sex-offender to Sunday worship. I think the parable probably has something to say about that.

The question, in these examples and in whatever other example or real life situation we confront, is this: Will God’s people embrace the people God embraces? Will God’s people embrace the people God embraces? Put another way, if the angels are partying, are we going to party, too?