

Sermon 2.21.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Second Sunday in Lent, Year C

Psalm 32 | 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 | **Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

We're in the season of Lent right now, a time of confession and repentance. So here is my confession: I've been the older brother in this morning's parable.

Growing up, I was the good child. Straight A's in school. Graduated from college with high honors and two degrees. I found a job right out of college, moved out, and supported myself. A few years later I got a full ride to seminary. I married an incredible woman who was – and is – way out of my league, and I graduated from seminary with the highest GPA in the school. And I tell you these things not with pride, but with shame, because this is not what made me the older brother in today's parable.

My sister took a different path in life. She unexpectedly had a baby when she was 17. The divorce that barely reached me so far away at college rocked her world. She burned every bridge with my mom and dad, making bad choice after bad choice. She moved to 6th Street in Allentown, a place every bit as low as the pigs the younger son worked with in the parable we heard, a place where gunshots ring out and gangs dominate.

And through it all, my parents loved my sister in a way that I just couldn't understand. They gave her cars to drive and did things over and over for her and they allowed her to move back in even though last time she had destroyed the house and torn out my parents' hearts when she left. When my sister finally started to mend some fences, my mom welcomed her with open arms and gave her a home to live in and helped to provide everything she needed.

But my sister's actions are not what made me the older brother in this parable.

It was my own sin and pride that did that. When it comes to my younger sibling, and the love I've seen my parents show her, at times I have been confused and angry, bitter and frustrated, resentful and even envious about the whole situation.

I have sometimes forgotten that a parent's love is freely given, not earned.

That's what this parable is really about. Usually we think it's about the younger son. We've taken to calling it the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," as if the young, wayward child is the most important character in the whole thing, and his actions define the story.

Other times people have focused on the older son, thinking *he's* the main character, that this parable is about not being resentful when grace is shown to other people, people we think don't deserve it. When this parable was originally heard by Jewish religious leaders who were upset at the notion that God's grace was being offered to tax collectors and sinners and *Gentiles*, they would have felt convicted in their own sin and bitterness. And while that's a perfectly fine way to understand this parable, that's still not what it's about.

This parable is about the father.

It was incredibly insulting for a son to ask for his inheritance while his father was still alive. Even though he knew it was a bad idea, even though he was hurt, the father did what his son asked. Giving the son his inheritance meant selling off part of the land, and this was a big deal, because Jewish families believed that God had given them that land. The youngest son left and turned his back on his entire family. He rejected the religion and traditions he'd been taught. He lived in sinful, depraved, shameful ways.

But it was his father back at home who lived with the real burden. In that culture, having a son who behaved this way was seen as publicly shameful for the parents. The father couldn't

go to the market without people staring, couldn't go to the well for water without hearing the whispers. Because of his son, he had been humiliated and embarrassed. In first-century Palestine, the common practice and social custom was to disown a son who behaved this way.

That's what makes this parable so scandalous. Because this is not what the father did. When the son finally decided to come home, we read that while he was still "far off, the father saw him." (v. 20) And this is the most important detail in the entire story. While he was still far off, the father saw him! Instead of choosing to disown his son or become angry and bitter, the father had been waiting for him. Looking for him. Every day since the son had left, the father had worried. For hours every day, he sat outside the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of his son coming home, hoping, wishing, praying that it would happen.

And when the father saw the son approaching, he ran to meet him. Instead of waiting for his son to apologize and come to him, the father sprinted out. Instead of making his son pay for what he had done, the father put him in the best clothes he could find. Instead of yelling or getting even or demanding that his son fix things, the father welcomed him with open arms. Instead of worrying about what was fair, the father celebrated and gave thanks.

This isn't the parable of the prodigal son, this is the parable of the good father.

Out of every story and parable in the Bible, this is the one that most clearly shows who God is and reveals God's heart to us. God is the Good Father. He loves *everyone*, and he cares for all of his children, including you.

If you feel lost like the younger son, if you feel like you've wandered far from home, and turned your back on what you know is right. If you've made mistakes, and you're carrying the weight of shame and embarrassment. If you feel like you're too far gone, God your Father

welcomes you home with open arms, like I witnessed my parents do with my sister. God sees you, and no matter who you are or what you've done or where you've been or anything else, God's answer to your life is Jesus.

Jesus was God's way of sprinting towards us in love, seeing our sin and our need and our brokenness and our bad choices and the things we're ashamed of. In Jesus, God has run out to us, while we are still far away, full of compassion, and thrown his arms around us, clothing us with grace and mercy, providing us forgiveness and life, offering us new life – eternal life. When we use the word 'grace' at church, this is what we mean – a Father who sees a rebellious, sinful child who has done wrong and caused hurt and shame and who chooses to respond with overwhelming, never-ending, unconditional, and everlasting love and forgiveness.

Our Father's love is a gift freely given.

Given not because of who we are, but because of who *God* is.

At times, we've all been the older son in this parable – at least I trust that it's not just me. At times we've been resentful of the grace shown to others. Maybe it's the co-worker who gets off without any consequences. The friend who is forgiven when they don't deserve to be. The enemy that's treated with compassion and love. We love grace for ourselves, but it doesn't always feel *fair*, even for us pastors, when it's given to other people.

But that's the nature of grace. It's given to those who are undeserving. God is God, and we're not, and God can choose to show mercy and grace to whoever he darn well pleases. Even the people we don't like. Even people we think don't deserve it. And when others around us are shown grace, we can choose to be resentful of that fact, like this older son and like the older son in today's reading, both of us thinking that it's our younger sibling's actions that matter

most, or we can remember that it's our Father's actions that truly matter, and we can celebrate the grace and love of God, and the grace shared by others.

We can celebrate that our Father in heaven cares more about loving his children than about being *fair*. We can celebrate every time a sinner comes home, every time God finds someone who is lost, every time someone experiences love and forgiveness, because when it comes to God's love, there's more than enough to go around! God's embrace and love are deeper, and wider, and higher than anything we can possibly imagine.

And we can choose to live that out towards those who have wronged us. The people who have hurt and betrayed and embarrassed us. Knowing that we have experienced such incredible grace and love from God, we can choose to make others pay when they hurt us, to talk about what's "fair" and what they "deserve," to hold it over them and try to get even, we can choose to be angry and bitter.

Or we can be children of our Heavenly Father. The healing was only possible because the father decided that his love for his son was more important than his own pain and pride. In our relationship with God, our salvation is only possible because our Heavenly Father has decided that his love for us is louder, stronger, and more important than anything we say or do. And in our relationships with others, when we're hurt and someone has done us wrong, reconciliation will only be possible when we decide that our love for them matters more than making them pay or giving them what they deserve.

We can choose to give grace. The grace I saw my mom and dad offer. The same grace God has given to us in Christ. Amen.