

Sermon for November 19th, 2006
The Prodigal Son and His Brother #2
Luke 15:11-32

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, oh God, our rock and our redeemer, Amen.

I come from a family of brothers. I was the fifth of five boys, and when I say that, people usually say, Oh your poor mother. They'd be right. We would yell at each other, we would wrestle with each other, punch each other, tackle each other in a brutal and painful way. And that was when we were getting along.

I have a friend named Tom, who helped take care of his father as he began to fade into the twilight of Alzheimer's disease. Tom told me, in his dry Norwegian style, that he had a physical resemblance to his uncle, the brother of his dad. And he described it this way: "This was a brother my dad didn't like. They'd been mad at each other for fifty years. And so when I came over for a visit, my dad always started by being mad at me." Tom described this as Norwegian Alzheimer's; "when you forget everything except your grudges." You ay know a couple families like this.

Jesus taught in many ways. He taught by example, the way he lived his life. He taught by preaching prophetically, by calling Israel to live up to its own highest standards. He taught by teaching from the Hebrew Bible, and interpreting it. And he taught by storytelling, through parables and metaphorical language. The Prodigal Son and his Brother stands out as one of his greatest. Like a fine jewel, or a great piece of sculpture, the more you look at it, the richer it becomes.

As Maureen read from Deuteronomy, a disobedient son could be killed by his father. Jewish law allowed it, and so did Roman law; a father had the power of life or death over his sons. Anecdotal evidence from the times also reports that if a father was inclined to forgive his son, the son might be allowed to sleep outside for a year or two, and work as a servant would. Then he might get a promotion to some sort of house servant role, for a couple more years. Then he might get some sort of family recognition, in a lowly, distant cousin sort of manner. Only after several years of penance would the father allow the son to resume his former place in the family structure.

This was a shame-based society; and that means you could not do much at all to increase the stature of your family, but you could do many things to bring it into disgrace. So let's look at how much disgrace this son, the youngest, brought on to the family. His share of the property would be about a third. And by asking for the inheritance now, he is saying several things at once. First, he is saying, Father, I can't wait for you to die. Second he is saying, I refuse to work with you and my brother any more. In this environment, they would all be working together to make a living, sharing the proceeds, say maybe a herd of sheep. The father would own it, the sons would manage it, the sons would care for the father in his old age, and would inherit the sheep at his death. But this son says, "I cannot wait for you to die, I will not work with you any more, I will not care for you in your old age, I will stick my brother with that job, and I don't even want to live in the same town as you." Insult, disgrace, shame, in every one of these steps.

Then he leaves town, and he wastes the inheritance with loose living and hard drinking. He squanders it, which is what prodigal means in this context, a wasteful extravagance. Very shaming in a frugal, tough place like Palestine. You would not want to know this guy, or even be

known as someone who knows him. Or especially be known as a member of his family.

And then what? He ends up feeding Pigs! In a society that sees pork as an abomination to eat, this is worse than eating any bar-b-qued ribs, this is beyond un-kosher, it is shameful. This guy is working for people who have pigs, who eat pigs, he is feeding the pigs, and he is not even eating as good as the pigs are. How low can you go?

Well, now that he has bottomed out, in verse seventeen, it is reported, "He came to himself." And he decides to throw himself at the mercy of his father.

On the way back home, he is practicing his speech, because he may have only a minute to make his case before his father decides to either crush him like a bug, or let him in to gather a few crumbs at the edge of the table. The son is practicing how to say, "I am not worthy!"

Now, let's talk about the father. What does the father do? The proper thing for him would be to stand there, waiting for his no-goodnik son to come crawling up, begging for his life. The father should have stood there, maintaining his dignity with anger and contempt on his face, as the errant boy makes his blubbering speech begging for mercy. And what does this father do? He runs to him. He runs to him. Now remember, he is in a robe, and in order to run in a robe, you have to gather it up a bit, and show your bare legs, and this is another shaming act, only someone with no dignity would show his legs, to run like this. This father, however, is filled with compassion, and he runs to him, and he embraces him and he kisses him. The son gets a couple lines of his speech out but the father is already ignoring him. He is calling to the servants, to bring the best robe, one that is reserved for the most high holidays. He puts a ring on his finger, which instantly signifies that the son is accepted back into the household with all the dignity and respect of a son in full-fledged honor and acceptance! This is crazy! He tells them to put sandals on his feet. Sandals are not worn by slaves, even most servants, this son has skipped all the levels of shaming and contrition that anyone would expect him to have to go through- this is extravagant forgiveness!

Then he orders them to kill the fatted calf. Now meat was not eaten regularly, and when it was, it was always a special occasion. There were no refrigerators then, and if you killed the calf, you invited everyone over to eat it, because otherwise it would spoil. And the fatted calf was the one reserved for a very special occasion. This is a multi-level extravagance of forgiveness unlike any other! This is a prodigal father! One Might say.

Well, One does say it. Remember, Jesus starts the story by saying, "There was a man who had two sons." The eldest son comes in from working in the field, and hears celebrating. He asks a servant, 'What's all this?' And he finds out his brother has returned, and has been instantly accepted back into the family, with full rights and privileges. The brother that has impoverished the family business. The brother who stuck him with caring for dad by himself. The brother who was not there to defend the father from wolves, or robbers, or the Romans, but instead took away the economic power of a third of the estate, and has come back broke, in rags, hung over and broke.

The eldest brother feels this shame, and he shames his father in return. His father is throwing a party, and the Eldest brother refuses to come in. The father is required to go out and ask him in, further shaming the father. The eldest berates his father, shaming him yet again. He says, "In all the years I have served you faithfully, you never gave me as much as an extra large pizza to share with my buddies when we are watching the game, and now, This Son of Yours- *This son of yours-* comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, and you kill the

fatted calf for him?"

I'd be mad. That's not justice. That's not fair. That's not obeying the law of the Hebrew Bible. That's rewarding someone who deserves to be punished. It doesn't make sense, and if you're the one who had resisted temptation all these years, hoping for some sort of payoff and never getting it, this is particularly galling. How can this be?

But the father, in his extravagant compassion, understands what this son is feeling. "Son, you are always with me. All that I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours- *this brother of yours*- was dead. And now, he's alive."

Now let's pause for a moment. Here's where the story ends. We don't know what happens next. Jesus leaves us at the edge of a cliff-hanger. There is no final scene of reconciliation, like there would be in a movie. We don't see the eldest hugging his brother, saying, "Yeah, you're right, Dad." He doesn't go into the party. or even walk away in a huff. The request has been posed to the eldest by the father, and that's all, folks.

So what does that mean? In analysing this as a parable, there is only one technical means of interpreting the ending. That is, it is left to the reader, to the hearer, to respond. Are you going to forgive the no-goodnik? Are we going to take him in? Are you going into the party? That is the question, and Jesus is the one asking.

Dr. King once said, "God told us we must love our enemies, but he didn't say we had to like them. And that's good, because some of those folks are pretty unlikable." But if Dr. King can love the racist, who bombed his house, threatened his family, beat up his buddies, and ended up killing him, do you think we could let in the brother who does not deserve forgiveness? The church spends a lot of time identifying those who do not live up to our standards of conduct. But does it spend as much time welcoming, with hospitality, anyone who shows up at the door?

This is a powerful story. It is a rich piece of storytelling. But it isn't because I like the style that I bring it to you today. It's because when I was a chaplain, I used this story to help people who were fighting for their lives, because it was the only story I could tell.

Sometimes I worked in the psych unit, where patients who had attempted suicide would be examined and helped by psychiatrists until it was assessed that they were no longer a threat to themselves. Some people were fighting chronic depression, some were working through trauma

I had one patient who was sexually abused by a relative when the patient was very young, and the question posed to me was this: "Where was God when that was happening to me? Why do I feel like God hates me?" How would you answer that?

I answered it by telling this story, and then saying, "Let's re-frame this picture of God you have. What happened to you was not what God intended for you. It was wrong and it was bad. And while it was happening to you, God was there in the room with you, weeping. God was going through it with you, and weeping. And now God wants you to come back, and know this love, and if you do, God will come running to you.

Another patient with depression said, "I can't feel God's love, and I am starting to wonder if it even exists. Because if God loves me, I don't feel worthy of that love. Even if I know God will forgive me, I don't feel forgivable." I answered by telling this story, and I said to this patient, "You are being your own older brother. You are saying to God, 'You can't possibly forgive this person because of how awful this person has been.' But that is a small picture of God. That is not an infinite God. That is projecting your own image of what you could forgive, and

assuming God has the same limitations that you have. That's not how I understand God. God is asking you, how are you at being loved? God is asking you, why can't you believe that I will love you, that I will forgive you, that I will let you back in the household, not as a slave or in a state of punishment, but as my own child? God is saying, I love you, and if you come back to me, I will run to you."

So now we have to write our own end to this story, every day. Jesus is asking, "Are you going to celebrate the return of your brother, or yourself? Do you trust God enough to allow yourself to be loved? Are you going to allow yourself to be taken back, or are you going to stand at the door in anger, and say 'This person, me, I do not deserve this love. It's too big, and if I don't understand it, it can't be true.' Jesus is asking you. 'Are you going to be the prodigal son And his brother? Are you going to keep yourself, and your brother, out of the party God is trying to throw for you?' Jesus is describing his father, and Jesus says, 'If you come back to God, no matter what, God will run to you, and kiss your cheek, and put the ring on your finger, and wrap you in his robe, and put sandals on your feet, and invite everyone over to celebrate. Are you coming into the party? Are you allowing your brother to come in too? Thanks be to God, amen.