

Sermon Trinity 3 2020

June 28, 2020

Luke 15:11-32

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson which was previously read, the parable of the “Prodigal Son.”

When the celebration for the return of the Prodigal Son happens, rather than joy from the Elder Brother, we hear of anger and a demand to remain outside. Jesus describes this in the parable saying, **“But he was angry and refused to go in.”** He was enraged and did not desire to enter. Can you blame him? After all, this brother had come and asked for the inheritance. This meant that it was the equivalent to telling the father that he was as good as dead to him. Right? Isn’t that when one gets an inheritance? They don’t inherit it during the lifetime of the father, no it’s when death comes. But this younger son in his greed and impetuosity wanted it now. And this was complex, apparently. By that I mean this wouldn’t have been as simple as just opening up the checkbook and giving the son a note to deposit in his bank account. Nor would it be as simple as opening up the treasury and taking out the coins. No, as I read about this, apparently the division would have had to be accomplished by selling the land and all that was on it, according to the father’s instruction.

Now, traditionally, the eldest son would receive double the next oldest, and so on and so forth. There would also have been a dowry taken out for the daughters to be married. In this case there are no daughters mentioned, and no explicit discussion. But there property was divided. And with the impetuosity of the son, this seems like it could have been a fire sale. He wanted to get out of there. All the more—again from what I read—the buyers likely wouldn’t have been plentiful. The people around would have been appalled at the insult this child perpetuating against his father, and many potential buyers would have demurred from adding insult to the father in that way. Low demand, likely a low selling price, right?

Then there’s one more thing that makes this hard for the brother—coming back to the day of the story, to his anger and refusal to enter—now that the younger son is back—and he’s back in the family if you can’t tell; he’s got the family robe, the family seal, the shoes, the status, he’s back—and now that he’s back, he’s back on the inheritance list, again! Right, the inheritance of the father isn’t going to just skip over him, no this father is so wasteful in his generosity that there’s no stipulation. The son is back. And think about it. The land is at best a third less than before, unless the father’s that crazy that he gave half of it for the son to sell. So it produces at least a third less every year. Then when the father actually is

deceased, that division is going to happen again. And who gets the short end of the stick in all this? The Elder Son. It's coming out of his part now. The insult to the family the first time was bad enough, but at least the Elder Son had what he had. Now that's getting eaten into. So, it's understandable that the Elder Son is mad. I think we can all relate when it comes down to brass tacks, can't we? We can understand why this son isn't exactly excited to go dance and feast at the return of this brother of his—or as he puts it his father's son, can't we?

But we get the clear point from Jesus that this anger is problematic, don't we? In fact, what we see is that his description of the Elder Son makes this point even clearer. When the father, who is so obviously gracious, comes out and tries to bring the Elder Son into the joy of the feast, what does this son say? **“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.”** Now, I think that captures the intent well enough, but I'd like to paint the picture a little further. This word for service is that which is used for slavery. “Look how many years I slaved away for you, Dad! Look how many years I toiled like a servant for you.” And there's more. The word for having not disobeyed your command there is to say literally, “I never let a command of yours pass by.” Or “I never let a command of yours be slighted by me.” It's like he's had his checklist. “Look at the son I am. Dad said to do x,y, and z. And I did x,y, and z. Check. Check. And Check.” This was his job. He was there to make sure he saw through to just how much he would be obedient. And what was the problem with that? He missed the love of the father through it. “Dad, I did all of this, all this time, and **yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.**” But he missed it, **“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.** Son, this isn't about what's mine and what isn't for you. Son, I love you and all this is mine is for you too. Son, I want you to love me as a son, not serve me as a slave.” But the son missed it. You see he's enslaved to his legalism.

You know, we often focus on this passage about how we are those younger sons, about how we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And that's absolutely right of us. We should. We should see the immense mercy that God has for us in our sin. But those of you that read “The Prodigal God” with us a couple of summers ago, might remember from that that I'm taking a page out of that book here—or more than a few pages, almost literally, out of that book. It's good for us to look at this Elder Son too and make sure we're not that. I say this because it's so easy to be both sons in different ways.

For example this week I read the story of a man named Eugene Debs. Now Mr. Debs was a man who was known for his work as a political activist, a trade unionist, and who was a candidate for president in five elections. Interestingly, he was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, and died just over in Elmhurst. But none of this is pertinent to the story. From what

I read about Mr. Debs, he saw himself as a very dedicated follower of the example of Christ, and the causes he supported were in large part in view of that example. He wanted equity for peoples because he saw Christianity as demanding this. In fact, what I read said that he hated organized religion because the people were too hypocritical in their own following of Jesus. He was quoted to go so far as to say, "I never darken a church door," because of the hypocrisy of those inside.

This is the spirit of the Elder Brother, and I'm sure you've heard that before. I'm sure you've met someone who wouldn't go to church because the people, or maybe even the pastor was too much of a hypocrite. I remember a friend from college who stepped away from the faith because he didn't like the thought that it was possible that if Hitler repented between the moment he shot himself and his soul exited his body, then he would be with Christ. It really, really saddened me. Yet this is legalism. This is checking off the list in order to show my own righteousness, how I've done x,y, and z, and look at how they're not, over there.

Of course, if it's not obvious we live with the spirit of the Elder Son all around us right now. We live in an Elder Brother culture. Watch the news. Watch Social Media. Watch how everyone is lynched if they don't stand firmly to the company line. And this goes all ways. It's right, it's left, it doesn't matter. And why? Because then I can justify myself and feel good about the person I am. I can feel good about how right I am. If you wear a mask, then you're a good person. If you don't wear a mask, then you show your enlightenment. If you say black lives matter, you show you really love people. If you say all lives matter, you show you really love people. We're all righteous in our own sight today, aren't we?

As I say that you might not think that's the case because society is turning so much from God. And it is, it's turning away from God's commands. And in that way that we're turning away God's Law, we're becoming what's called Antinomian. But I had a professor in seminary who always said that if you scratch the surface of an Antinomian, someone who opposes law in general, or God's Law in particular, then you'll see a legalist. And look at the law that's out there. Look at how someone like J.K. Rowling—the author of the Harry Potter books, not someone who is a staunch social conservative by any means—look at how she can express concern for how transgenderism will affect women, and she's slaughtered by people who owe their careers to her, because she's not sensitive enough to the plight of those who see their sex and gender as different. There's a law there and if you don't follow it, you'll pay. It's a grand spirit of legalism.

But Christians, this legalism isn't what is needed. The spirit of the Elder Brother of this story isn't what is needed. No, a different spirit is needed. What's need is the spirit of the

father in this story. The spirit of the one who is wasteful in generosity. What's needed is the different older brother. Again taking a page from Keller's book "The Prodigal God," what's needed is the generous older brother who willingly sacrifices for the younger. I mentioned how this inheritance would be taken from the Elder Son, taken from his portion for the younger. Well, Jesus is our Older Brother. He is that One who willingly sacrifices Himself for us. He was the One who was willing to bear the cost of our plundering our Father's house and wasting His gifts on wild living and reckless spending. He was the One who was willing to bear that cost on the cross in His mercy and in His generosity of spirit.

And look at the joy this brings, by His resurrection. Look at the celebration that's happening because the Father is so ecstatic about the Younger Son's return. Jesus is the perfect Elder Son who carries that same generosity for us. That's the One who enters into the feast with us when we repent of our sin. And He's more joyful about it than we are! He's the One who has all of the righteousness in Himself, yet rejoices to give it to us, to share it with us where we fall short!

In fact, it's in this spirit that I love what is said to the Elder Son by the father in this story. He says, **"It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."** Now you might be thinking that I'm going to comment about the beauty of the dead being made alive and the lost being found, and that is beautiful. That is beautiful to us when we see our own resurrection from the dead, our own rescue from the lost estate in sin. But now, what I love, and what's the point of this whole chapter is the first part: "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad." The word there, again, paints a clear picture. It was fitting, but the connotation could even be that it was necessary. It wasn't just fitting to celebrate this repentance from the son and be glad. No, it wasn't just fitting, it was necessary. It had to happen.

Christian, that's the beauty of this story, our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rejoice in our repentance. They rejoice, they celebrate. It's necessary for them to do so. Why? Because they can't help their joy that we are in the family. And as we hear this familiar story again, it's good for us to be reminded that this is the case for the prodigals and the ones it's easy to mad at because of their sin. But it's also beautiful that the father comes out and pursues the Elder Son too. We see there, that He's not just trying to pull in the bottom of the barrel sinners to the feast. He wants everyone there. He wants you there when you're the Younger Son and He wants you there when you're the Elder Son. And as we consider ourselves in that Elder Son role today, thanks be to God that despite the fact the Elder Son was enslaved in his legalism, our perfect Elder Brother made the sacrifice for us that we can rejoice in the kingdom as is fitting. As is necessary. Amen.