

"God's Lost and Found: The Parable of the Elder Son"

Luke 15:11-32

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On my smart phone, I keep a library of over six hundred of my favorite songs on file. One that ESPECIALLY brings back fond memories is Albert Hammond's *It Never Rains in Southern California*- a number one hit from way back in 1972. It's the story of a young man who strikes out for California with his head full of large dreams and great expectations only to discover that the reality of life out there was nothing like what he had expected. It isn't long before he has lost everything and has to return home, feeling like a complete failure. He sings:

*I'm out of work, I'm out of my head  
Out of self-respect, I'm out of bread  
I'm under-loved, I'm under-fed, I wanna go home  
It never rains in California, but girl, don't they warn ya?  
It pours, man, it pours*

Well, as we know, this could have been the theme song of the Younger Son whom we looked at LAST week. He was a young man with wanderlust who couldn't wait to escape what he considered the dull imprisonment of home life so that he might taste all the pleasures and excitement he was so sure awaited him on the other side of the fence. Only, as many of US have had to learn from personal experience, our dreams don't ALWAYS measure up to the reality, that rather than *Blue skies, smiling at me. Nothing but blue skies, do I see*, life hands us the refrain, *It never rains in California, but girl, don't they warn ya? It pours, man, it pours*. And so our young friend ends up blowing his entire inheritance to where he is now destitute. Finally, he realizes that being a servant in his father's household would be infinitely preferable to being a beggar among strangers. The IRONY here, of course, is that only in SQUANDERING his portion of the family fortune does he discover his TRUE inheritance, that it ultimately lay not in gold or silver, in houses and in land, but in a Father who deeply loved him and could not give UP on him REGARDLESS how worthless or shameful he had been, that his REAL inheritance was the unconditional love and forgiveness that was ever held out to him.

But curiously enough, having proved his main point, Jesus doesn't stop here with his parable. Why does he have to speak of an "elder" brother- of one who does NOT leave home but rather who WORKS HARD for his father- faithfully maintaining the family farm, seeing that the animals are watered and fed and cleaned, harvesting the ripened crops, and overseeing the rest of the servants. You have to believe that after describing for us the dangers of being a wastrel (a "prodigal" as HISTORY has branded the younger son), Jesus now wants to give us an example of someone who did everything RIGHT, a brother who was industrious and prudent and self-controlled, someone who possessed the kind of character any of us should wish that our OWN son or daughter to have- or IS he?

To answer this, we have to keep in mind the audience to whom he was speaking. It was the Pharisees and scribes who had become very critical of Jesus because he not only

WELCOMED sinners but he ATE with them- the highest expression of hospitality there was. With these parables in Luke 15, Jesus is purposely addressing their murmuring here. As we saw in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, his stories concern two types of persons- those who are lost OUTSIDE of the household of faith, of whom the Shepherd must leave the ninety-nine in search of the one; and those lost INSIDE the household of faith, lost within their own home, yet, who do not know it. Well the Pharisees were in this SECOND grouping- people who were very religious but who did not KNOW they were lost and, hence, did not even know GOD.

I'm sure there are times we can all identify with the younger son, especially when we were younger OURSELVES, but as we become older, then the ELDER brother describes more our situation. Over time, we become loyal and responsible Presbyterians, working hard for our church and supporting it with our tithes and our attendance. Week after week, we sit in our pews to hear about the love of Jesus and how we are called to love each other the same way WE are loved. With one voice, we enthusiastically sing, "And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love," all the while allowing petty jealousies and all kinds of negative resentment to remain unconfessed and unforgiven in our hearts. As hard as it is to admit, the fact is that Christians (and certainly I include MYSELF here) can be among the most spiteful, the most hurtful, the most unforgiving and self-righteous individuals ANYWHERE, and all congregations everywhere HAVE them- unloving, unforgiving members with unloving, unforgiving attitudes.

In one of my churches, I had two prominent members- one a Deacon, the other the church treasurer, who could not stand one another. Every Sunday during worship, they would share the same pew--praying the same prayers and singing the same hymns together--but OUTSIDE that sanctuary, they could barely exist in the same room together. One day, I asked one of them why there was such animosity between them and she went on to describe an event that had occurred some THIRTY YEARS EARLIER! Recently, I was shocked to learn that a congregation I had pastored some years before in California had lost some of its most faithful and generous members- not over some difference in policy or direction the church was moving but over the issue of which color the church should be painted, either white or beige. And so the message of this parable is ESPECIALLY directed towards US, and it is saying that we can be earnest and diligent and extremely conscientious about our work, but if we serve our families, our church, and our community in the wrong spirit, with hearts full of selfishness and jealousy and grudges and constant complaining, we can undermine all of our work and accomplishments.

Our text tells us that the elder son was out in the field when the younger son returned. The two brothers are a study in contrasts. Unlike his wastrel brother, the older one seems to be a tireless worker who hates to waste time. Where the former is a risk taker, the latter enjoys the safety and security of home. He doesn't quarrel with duty and regulation, with order and routine- everything the younger son abhorred. Where the younger son's head was filled with dreams and visions and ideals, his brother is mainly concerned with such practical realities as taking care of business and maximizing the farm's profit. Drawing near, he hears music and dancing. Calling over one of the servants, he asks him what all the noise is over. He replies, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound." Those had to have been the LAST words he wanted to hear. Consumed with anger, he thinks to himself, "What does he want now? MORE inheritance so that he can blow that TOO on drugs

and booze and prostitutes?" (Interestingly, we're never told what it is the younger son DID throw away his money on and so perhaps the older brother was assuming those things--drugs and booze and prostitutes--which he HIMSELF would have loved to have indulged in if only HE had possessed the same kind of courage his YOUNGER BROTHER did.) Refusing to go in, he wants nothing to do with him, not even acknowledge his return, and so it is the father who comes out of the house to seek HIM out.

Once again we see the extraordinary love and concern of the father. As he loved the younger son enough to give him his inheritance early; loved him enough to be anxious about his whereabouts and condition while he was yet in a distant land; loved him enough to live in constant anticipation of his son's return and when he DOES, he runs to him and embraces him. He puts a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet, and clothes him in the finest robes. And then he bestows upon him the GREATEST gift of ALL- he restores him to his previous position of honor in that household. For THIS father, once a son meant ALWAYS BEING a son. Well as the father went out to receive the younger son, he now goes out to receive his OLDER son to invite HIM in.

But rather than rejoice over his return as the FATHER does, he remains angry with a heart sullen with resentment. He refuses to enter the house and greet his brother, a house now full of music and dancing and merriment. In fact, he's not even willing to acknowledge the younger son AS his brother, referring to him as "that son of yours." Thus, with the younger son's return, a dramatic reversal has taken place here. The prodigal has had to endure much hardship and travail in order to discover his TRUE home- in the loving arms and care of his father, while for the ELDER son, that house has now become MUCH too small to hold both him AND his good-for-nothing sibling, that HIS heart is now as far away as the young prodigal's had PREVIOUSLY been.

There are some important lessons we can take away from this. FIRST, the elder son had forgotten where he had gotten his inheritance from. It never occurs to him that everything he is and owns- his father's affection, his standing as a son in that household, his inheritance of property and possessions, were not things he had EARNED, but were graciously GIFTED to him. As his father assured him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours," he, like his brother, was the beneficiary of his father's love. What could he have possibly done to earn or merit any of this? Everything had been freely and unconditionally given to him. He was born a son and these were the privileges of a father to his son.

What a contrast to his brother. He now knew that EVERYTHING was a gift and for the rest of his life, he would be conscious of the meaning of love and grace and forgiveness. It had been a hard lesson, but now he understood that property and possessions could be squandered in a few days' time but the GIFT OF TRUST AND LOVE AND FORGIVENESS WAS ETERNAL. He at last knew what his REAL inheritance was- a father's love for his son, an inheritance that could not be sold or lost or broken. He had been lost, but now is found; was dead but is now alive and so his life could never again be the same.

This morning, we TOO have received a SIMILAR inheritance from our Heavenly Father, our Eternal God. We all come before God as prodigals and but to our utter amazement, rather than JUDGMENT AND CONDEMNATION, we are received with OPEN ARMS. We

fall before him as paupers and he lifts us up and covers us with the finest robes. He tells us we are his children, that he loves us with an everlasting love and how NOTHING shall ever separate us from either his presence or his love. And though we may fall again and again and STILL again, God is ready to forgive, NOT seven times, but SEVEN TIMES SEVENTY! When WE understand just how much WE are loved and forgiven, how can it NOT wipe away any of the pride and arrogance of the elder son from our heart and have it be replaced by the praise and joy and gratitude of the younger boy. How can we NOT praise him and love him in return with hearts full of joy and gratitude once we truly know ourselves to be loved and forgiven by him?

And SECOND, if the elder son had forgotten where HIS INHERITANCE had come from, he also forgot HIS SONSHIP, that he was a family member, that he was loved and trusted and cared for precisely because he WAS a son. Where the YOUNGER brother was so ashamed for what he had done that he felt he could no longer be called his father's son but would have been content to live under his roof as the lowest form of slave- a hired laborer, the OLDER brother, whose share of the inheritance has given him control over most of the estate, who is as deeply loved by his father as his younger brother is, regards himself, NOT AS A LOVED SON, but rather as a HIRED LABORER. He tells his father, "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." The crux of the matter is that he never KNEW what it was like to live as a loving son to a loving father. Rather, he only saw himself as a toiling servant or slave in his own household- always taking orders or doing just as he was told. This has to be the ULTIMATE tragedy, how everything that could possibly make his life rich and rewarding can be at his disposal and he CANNOT SEE it, that he is BLIND to the reality of his sonship. Instead, he can only feel like a slave who has been cheated or treated unfairly. Here his lazy brother has done NOTHING, yet has gained EVERYTHING; while he has done EVERYTHING, but feels he has ended up with NOTHING.

The reason this parable continues to have such an enduring hold over our hearts and imaginations is because it so powerfully yet ever so SIMPLY sums up for us what the "good news" of the gospel is all about. This is a message that any CHILD as well as a university professor can understand and appreciate. It is proof to us that God is our Heavenly Father who loves us with an everlasting love, and has promised how nothing—NO NOTHING—will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. We don't have to strive to earn or merit God's love- it is free and unconditional because we are his sons and daughters UNTO ETERNITY. This means that we never have to fear that the Gates of Heaven are shut to us, for he stands at the entrance of that long driveway in anticipation of our return when we have wandered off. To live as a child of God means that we never have to fear if we fall again or take future risks that might lead ONCE AGAIN to failure, for our Father pays no attention to what we have lost- that can always be replaced. Rather, he is ONLY interested in restoring any broken RELATIONSHIPS, in seeing that his children are safely returned to the fold REGARDLESS of how MANY times they may wander far afield.

Furthermore, we see how God's love and grace is so much GREATER than any of us can possibly conceive, that it reaches out and encompasses persons we were so sure lay OUTSIDE the gates of his kingdom, perhaps even persons we WANTED to see excluded because it somehow made us feel BETTER, more SUPERIOR than them. Over the years, I can't tell you how many Christians--and even MINISTERS--I've heard speak with relish and almost GREAT

DELIGHT as to how all Muslims and Jews are lost and going to hell, and of course the same for Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses and anyone ELSE who may be different from themselves- and that includes our GAY and LESBIAN brothers and sisters. These persons seemed so sure that THEIR names are written in the Book of Life while EQUALLY confident of those who are NOT. Well this parable dispels that sort of thinking for here we see that his kingdom is ACTUALLY reserved for those who don't even THINK they're candidates for such an honor, while those who--due to their hardness of heart--presume TOO MUCH will be SURPRISED when they find themselves on the OUTSIDE looking in.

Well, you've heard the stories of both sons now. I think many of us can identify with the younger son who wanders off until he finds he has squandered everything, only to be welcomed back with open arms. But then, more of us may be like the ELDER son, always a member of that household, never wandering but always trying to prove to others or perhaps OURSELVES just how good or righteous we are, always being negative or critical of those who fail to measure up to OUR standards. Well, the Father's love and acceptance is extended to those of us AS WELL. Curiously, Jesus does not provide any resolution to his story and this is intentional- he leaves it up to each listener to provide his OWN. However, the ending I find myself most INTRIGUED but also DISTURBED by is the one that Dr. Leslie Weatherhead--the late, great pastor of London's famed City Temple--imagined at the conclusion of one of his sermons:

*In my imagination I see the end of the story. I see the lights shining from the windows of the farmhouse. I hear the music and the laughter and the merry voices of those who make high festival. And then I see the elder brother, his heart darkened with sullen resentment, his spirit shrouded in self-pity. I see him slinking down the muddy lane. He throws a glance over his shoulder at the lighted windows of home. Happiness there is hateful to him. His brother's return has angered him. His brother's welcome has embittered him. He felt righteous because his brother had been labeled unrighteousness. The feasting has stripped that feeling from him. This unmerited joy of his brother's, this unpurchased affection infuriates him. Into the awful loneliness of the soul that rejects love passes the elder brother. The father still longs for him and still loves him. But even a love that is infinite cannot compel response. I seem to hear a melancholy wind moaning and howling round the farm building. I seem to see that secret, tragic figure pass into the shadows, lost in the darkness of the night.*