

## GETTING CLOSER TO JESUS THIS LENT

## 4. "When We Are the Elder Brother

Luke 15:1-3, 25-32

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2016

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Today we conclude the Lenten sermon series on "Getting Closer to Jesus this Lent." We have experienced Jesus in the wilderness being tempted, In Luke 13 Jesus is asked tough questions to which he said, "Worry about your own repentance," and last week the first half of today's parable about the "Prodigal Son" or the "Father who had two sons."

A little recap from last week, Luke tells the story of a certain man who had two sons, and the sons were different. (Is that surprising?) The younger one took a huge portion of the family wealth and went off to a foreign land where he squandered it all on "riotous living."

When he decided to return home, the younger son, rehearsed his apology to his father all the way home, ("I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am not worthy to be called your son...") but his father did not want to hear it. He ran out to meet him, hugged and kissed his son and welcomed him home with a big party. The father probably should have been more careful, for while it appeared that everybody was pleased and excited with the celebration, there was one man who was not.

Let me read it to you, "Now the elder brother was out in the field, working. When he came home at the end of the day, he heard music and dancing in the house. He called out a servant and asked him what on earth was going on. The servant said, 'Your little brother has come home and your father is ecstatic. He has pulled out all the stops to have this joyous party.'" Oh dear, it does seem strange that the father did not send someone out to tell him when the brother arrived, or even better, to have gone out himself.

Well, anyway the elder son came in from the field just as the party was starting. How do you think he should have felt, relieved that his brother was home ... safe after all that time away? His brotherly love and affection should have come to the fore and he should have wrapped his arms around him and maybe even shed a small tear.

No. No, that was not going to happen. He was mad. All of the pent up anger he had toward his brother for leaving and toward his father for enabling his leaving and his life style came rushing out. He wouldn't even go into the house. His father came out and begged him. There he tipped his hand. "Father," he cried, "All these years I have worked for you like a slave. I have never disobeyed your orders, and yet, you never threw me a party.

No wonder the elder brother was angry. Wouldn't you be? Especially if you are hardworking and dependable and take care of your parents, your family and anybody else who needs you. While your nutsy little brother chases harlots, gambles, buy's expensive togas, chariots, hats, swords and wine.

The elder working brother refused to go into the party because he felt overlooked and left out. I think he felt resentment, and he was cut to the core because not only had his father gone overboard with this extravagance for a child who never worked a full day or saved a single denarius and he hadn't even been invited to the party.

At that point many of us fathers would say, "That's it, let him stay out there. Send him some food and a glass of water." I know a family back home where the father told me he was relieved when one child chose not to come to the holiday dinners, because every time he came, there was trouble. He was always so negative, so contentious, he spoiled everything for everybody. The Dad told me he felt guilty about it, but on the occasions when he would hear that the aforementioned son and his wife were not able to come, he breathed a sigh of relief.

But this father in the parable, "Risking humiliation and shame," one commentator wrote, "left his guests and went outside in the evening air to plead with his son to come in to the party."

What's going on here? Throughout the conversation there are elements of distance and defiance revealed in the elder son. Notice, for example, that the elder brother never refers to his father as "father," in contrast to the younger son; nor does he refer to his younger brother as "brother", he says, "This son of yours...." In other words he is not mine. In contrast, the original Greek New Testament said that the father not only calls him, "My Son," but he uses the more affectionate "my dear child" (*teknon*), then adds "this brother of yours."

In other words, both boys are his sons. One person wrote, "He is apparently trying to restore a family, his family, which has fallen apart, or as we might say, it was *dysfunctional*. Notice that the father never argues with the elder son." Neither does he condemn him. He also never acknowledges what the elder son has said, that is without his devotion and his work, there would be no farm for the wandering fun loving little brother to come home to. He does not compare them, he acknowledges their uniqueness. He never says, "Why can't you, either one of you, be like your brother?"

He father stresses only the intimate relationship he has with his son. "You are always with me," he says, "and all that I have is yours." Presumably he means that the younger brother has already received his portion of the estate. And all that is left of the father's possessions, including the farm, will pass to the elder brother when he dies.

Last, he says "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this, your brother was dead, is alive; he was lost, and is found." He came home. He was lost and now is found, he was dead and now is alive ... not my son, but "this, your brother. You big dummy! ... He is your brother; it is time you gave up your distrust and jealousy and resentment ... and met him. Both of you are my sons and always will be."

"But Dad, you never threw a party for me. Is there no reward for faithfulness and hard work? If I had not worked the farm all these years, where would you be, or Mom, or little nutsy? There would be nothing for any of us! You never complimented me! You always assumed that I would be there. You never arranged it so that I might make merry with my friends. And 'now you kill the fatted calf for him. That's not fair!'"

Part of what the brother says is true. He is the one who always stayed home and took care of life on the farm. Maybe he didn't enjoy it as much as he said he did. But deep down I wonder if he was happy that he didn't have to share leadership with his brother. Now, he throws it into his father's face about not being appreciated.

Last week we had a painting by Rembrandt on the front cover of the bulletin. The painting was entitled, "The Return of the Prodigal," The renowned Christian writer Henry Nouwen's writes about Rembrandt: "Indeed Rembrandt was known to act often selfishly, ignorantly, and even vengefully at times. He is as much the elder son of the parable as he is the younger. When during the last years of his life, he painted both sons in this parable, he had lived a life in which neither the lostness of the younger son, nor the lostness of the elder son was alien to him. Both needed to come home. Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father." (pg. 65)

Maybe we should call it the *Parable of the Lost Sons*. "Not only was the younger son lost; he left home to look for freedom and happiness in a distant country; but the elder one who stayed home also became a lost man. Outwardly he did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but inwardly, he wandered away from his father. He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all of his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree." (pg. 69)

"The more I reflect on the elder son in me," Nouwen is speaking, "The more I realize how deeply rooted this form of lostness really is, and how hard it is to return home from there. Returning home from a lustful escapade seems so much easier than returning home from a cold anger that has rooted itself in the deepest corners of my being." (pg. 75)

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn once asked in the *Gulag*, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get rid of all the evil people in the world?" But the problem is that the evil we want to remove is not out there somewhere, it is rooted in the hearts of people we know.

All things cast a shadow. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Solzhenitsyn continues, "Evil lives inside my heart, right alongside the good man I try to be. So if we decided to remove the evil people, we will need to cut out part of the heart of every man and woman alive."

The Bible also knows how sometimes one parent has a favorite child, maybe both parents do. Think Isaac and Rebecca for example with the twins Esau and Jacob. I know how hard parents try to treat everybody equally, but the Bible also knows the rivalries and resentments in the story, and how it usually does not work out that way.

Like in the first family, the very first family, the one of Adam and Eve, the first two brothers got into a fight, and the one brother killed the other one. The Lord asked Cain where his brother Abel was. Cain said, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" The Lord said something like, "Yes, you are. The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground." It does not say that the elder brother in our parable wanted to kill his little brother, but you can guess he probably thought about it.

Let me lighten this up a little with a funny story. I found it in one of those “Letters children write to God series.” This time the little boy wrote to the Lord: “Dear God, I heard in Sunday school that in the first family the two brothers, Cain and Abel got into a fight and one of them killed the other one. Did you ever think about getting them each a room of their own to prevent this kind of thing? It seems to work at our house. At least everybody is still alive. Sincerely, Billy.”

Last week I ended by asking, “Are you the prodigal son or the forgiving father?” Today the question is, “Are you the elder son, the dependable one; or the forgiving father?” Do you see yourself being able to put aside your resentment and anger at your brother and your father? Or, do you see yourself being able to offer forgiveness? In this family love triangle can all of them come out winners?

The father wants both sons to return. Will the elder son come in or will he remain in his jealousy? The Bible leaves the answer open. But it is an openness which demands a lot of hard work and self-examination. “The attitude of the father towards his sons is not determined by their character, it is determined by his.”

Only the father is good. He loves both sons. He runs out to meet both. He wants both to sit at his table and participate in his joy. It is Jesus Christ I am speaking of. He wants each and all of us to return, he is ready to run out to meet you or to walk you into the party, for now and evermore.