

OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

August 29, 2021

Luke 15:11–32

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Holy God, Word made flesh, let us come to this story open to being surprised. Silence our agendas; banish our assumptions; cast out our casual detachment. Confound our expectations; clear the cobwebs from our ears; penetrate the corners of our hearts with this word. We know that you can, we pray that you will, and we wait with great anticipation. Amen.

We started last week looking at the story Jesus tells which is most commonly known as the Prodigal Son. We looked specifically at the younger son, the prodigal, who asked for his share of his inheritance and then took off to a distant land. While there, he squanders it all with bad choices and illicit living. Destitute, hungry, and with no prospects for a better future, he comes to his senses, and decides to return home. He rehearses the words of an apology, hoping his father will welcome him back, and sets off for home.

We pick up the story from there...

²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get

the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

When Jesus told this story to his listeners, they would have been on edge from the get-go. As soon as they heard the opening word, “There was a man who had two sons...” they would know something was up. No story in scripture that begins, “There was a man who had two sons, ends up well.” And most of the listeners, would have had an inclination to identify and root for the younger son in the story. Think Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau. When they heard the words, ‘There was a man with two sons,’ they would have known that they were in for a good story, and they would have been surprised to hear Jesus tell the story where the younger son “turns out not to be the righteous Abel, faithful Isaac, or clever Jacob but an irresponsible, self-indulgent, and probably indulged child.”ⁱ

I wonder, how many of us hearing this story – all of the story – end up identifying more with the older son. Some of you might even say he was the “good son.” He was the one that stayed behind, did the work, obeyed his father. And when he comes back from working in the fields, what does he find, but a party? No one came to get him. No one told him what was going on. He is forgotten. He hears noise and he has to ask a servant what is going on. The servant replies, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ O Happy Day!

For a moment, maybe, just maybe, there was a moment when the story was going to have a happy ending where all would be well, where the younger son arrived back home, and the party would last through the night.

But the older son becomes angry and refuses to join the party.

He cannot believe what he has heard. He is dumbfounded, and mad.

When the father comes out to find his older son, he pleads with him to come back into the party. And the older son lets it rip. All of the resentment he has been holding inside, all of the rage comes pouring out at the father.

‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

He’s so angry and resentful, that instead of being able to celebrate the return of his own brother he instead can only name him to his father as, “this son of yours.” When my own children were young, and if my wife had had a rough time with them, I would arrive home and she would talk

about “those children of yours!” The older brother does not even want to recognize his own relationship to his brother.

Just as earlier in the story, when the younger son thinks of his own plight, he compares himself in relation to his father’s servants, not his own brother, so now the older brother in the way he speaks seeks to sever the relationship as well. Just as the younger breaks from the family when he travels to a far land with his inheritance, so too is the older brother breaking ties with the family. If he is not a brother to the younger, than how can he be a son to the father? Perhaps one does not need to travel very far to also be lost.

Henri Nouwen, in his book, entitled, “The Return of the Prodigal Son,” talks about the lost-ness of the older son while still at home. He writes, “it is this lostness – characterized by judgment and condemnation, anger and resentment, bitterness and jealousy – that is so pernicious and so damaging to the human heart.”ⁱⁱ

The older son is not able to enjoy the news that a relation that was once thought dead has now returned and is alive. He can only compare himself with what his father has given to the younger brother. Even as all that the father owns belongs to the older son, he cannot be joyful. He is too busy taking account and keeping score. The older son complains only of what his father has never given him. He wants to count, to quantify, to measure and compare the outward things to somehow add up the love of the father. And I understand it. All of this keeping track, all of this counting and measuring, but it’s not really for us, it’s to serve a larger goal, to be fair. “We track things not because we often need to, but to keep things fair, to make sure things are running right.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The elder son might have just as well stomped his feet, crossed his arms, and yelled at his dad, “but, it’s not fair! He gets everything and you give me nothing!”

How many of us have heard, “well, life isn’t fair.” How many parents out there have uttered the words, “life isn’t fair.” Well, friends, life isn’t fair. Particularly in relationships. Equality sounds good in theory, but not everyone and everything should be treated in equal ways. Sometimes the equitable thing to do, not the equal thing, but the equitable thing is to treat people differently. Counting doesn’t work. Keeping track doesn’t work. Comparison doesn’t work. That’s not how love works.

“Imagine counting every good thing someone did for you and using that to judge how much they love you. Or imagine keeping track of every unhelpful or hurtful thing people in your life do to you and demanding payment! Worse, imagine them demanding payment from you for your mistakes!”^{iv}

It doesn’t work like that. And so, we get a father running to meet a younger son and throwing his arms around him before the younger son can utter a word. And we get a father leaving a party to plead with an older son to join in the celebration and joy. The father doesn’t count all the wrong the young son has done; he doesn’t count all the good the older son has done; he merely loves them and wants them to know they are loved.

The older son keeps track, “all these years...you never gave me... not even... this son of yours....” Comparison is the thief of joy. Keeping track leads to bitterness and resentment.

The older son, in his accounting, has become bitter, resentful, proud, unkind, the opposite of the fruit of the spirit. He is lost in place. He is lost in his relationships to his father and brother. And perhaps this lostness is harder to see, harder to recognize, but it he is no less lost. He cannot see the grace given him. Perhaps if it is difficult to see how you are lost, it is near impossible to recognize when you have been welcomed home. The story ends without resolution, the older son is still

standing outside the celebration, and we do not know his answer to the invitation to enter into joy and happiness.

Nouwen wonders which does more damage, “lust or resentment?” And he notes that “there is so much resentment among the ‘just’ and the ‘righteous.’ There is so much judgement, condemnation, and prejudice among the ‘saints.’ There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding ‘sin.’” The lostness of the older son is so difficult “because it is so wedded to the desire to be good and virtuous.”^v

There is a gentleman, Jerry Evenrud, here in Minnesota that was so taken by the story that Jesus tells of a man with two sons that he spent his life collecting artwork representing different aspects of the story. His collection became so large that it took over his house, with different rooms depicting different moments. There was a room for the departure of the young son, a room for his time amongst the pigs, his return, and a room for the older son outside the celebration. Mr. Evenrud eventually gifted the majority of his collection to Luther Seminary in St. Paul and eventually a book with reflections and pictures of the various artwork was created. Inside this book, is a prayer, written by Dom Helder Camara that has a prayer for the younger son and the older son side by side.

The prayer for the older son says this:

“I pray incessantly for the conversion of the prodigal son’s brother. Ever in my ear rings the dread warning: ‘the one has awoken from his life of sin. When will the other awaken from his virtue?’”

The older son has done everything right. He has been dutiful and obedient, so surely, he deserves more than the younger brother. But as Jesus tells us again and again, this is not how grace works. It doesn’t

matter when the laborers go to the field, they all get the same payment. This is not how love works. It is never earned on our own merit; it is not acquired because we are more pious or virtuous than others. It is a gift freely given.

We never get to hear the full conversation between the elder son and the father. One author imagines the conversation with the father and the older child.

“But see?” The father continues, “The only thing that matters is that fun, or no fun, your brother finally died to all that and now he’s alive again, whereas you, unfortunately, were hardly alive even the first time around.”

“Look, we’re all lost here, and we feel right at home. You, on the other hand, are alive and miserable, and worse yet, you’re standing out here in the yard as if you were some kind of beggar. Why can’t you see? You own this place. And the only reason you’re not enjoying it is because you refuse to be dead to your dumb rules about how it should be enjoyed. So do yourself and everybody else a favor: drop dead. Shut up, forget about your stupid life, go inside, and pour yourself a drink.”

The story of grace and return is also a story about judgement as well. It is also a story about being holier-than-thou and thinking we deserve what we get based on how we are. Remember last week when I mentioned that the way many Christians used to think was that you had to behave and believe before you could belong? This is where the older brother lives. He cannot accept the gracious invitation into a celebratory life because he is so hung up on being upset that the younger son hasn’t behaved in the right way, but he still gets to belong.

This is not a story of a bad brother and a good brother; it is the story of a father with two lost sons. This is the story of a father who desperately

wants his children to know how much they are loved. This is a story of a father who searches for all his children to welcome them. He runs to meet both. He invites both to the celebration.

The joy that the father has at the return of his younger son in no way diminishes the love he has for his older child. He loves them both.

As I said last week about the younger son, I say again this week. Maybe this isn't so much a story about forgiveness and grace, obedience and responsibility, as it is about belonging and welcome. About being a beloved child, no matter what. This is good news, for both the younger and the older. Jesus tells this story as the third story of finding what was lost, a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. In fact, two lost sons. Both sons are welcomed by the father.

May we not keep track with our love. May we not count in order to feel we have to earn love. May we rejoice that all can be welcomed.

Again, I say to you...

Our job is to welcome radically – with arms wide open, ever ready to throw a party and to invite those on the outside, in. Creating a larger community of beloved children of God. Our job is to share the things that give life: welcome, food, community, love. Our job is to utter the words, without reservation or hesitation, “welcome home, child of God.”

ⁱ Amy Jill Levine, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-08/parable-and-its-baggage>

ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, “The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming,” p. 70.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-4-c-the-prodigal-god/>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Nouwen, p71