

“GIVING UP: IV - ANGER”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
March 10, 2013

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

I want to begin this morning by telling you something that most of you know all too well - it's not easy being a parent. Now, I don't have children of my own, as you know, but I did grow up in a family with six children - so, just from that experience alone, I know, it's not easy being a parent. I saw all the up's and down's my parents went through - the times of great joy and happiness, and the times of stress when they probably wanted to pull their hair out.

And over the years of my ministry, I have been associated with hundreds and hundreds of parents, and heard their stories. And some of them, I've worked with closely as they've dealt with issues with their children. It's not easy being a parent.

If you need any more evidence of that, may I point out Exhibit A - this morning's Gospel lesson. Oh my, that poor father. We all know his story, we could tell it by heart. It's one of the Bible stories we learned as children, and we can't forget it, probably because we can see ourselves in it.

Let's revisit the story. A father has two sons, and presumably everything was pretty normal, until one day, his youngest son came and shocked him to his core. The youngest son wanted out. He wanted to hit the road, experience life, sow his wild oats. But in order to do that he needed his inheritance, money for the trip.

Now, back in that day, the inheritance only came to you when your parent died, so basically the young son was saying, "I don't want to wait until you die, just fork over the money and I'm out of here."

Surely, with a heart broken in two, the father did just that - he divided the inheritance, and gave the younger son that which would have come to him upon his father's death. And off, the young boy went.

And boy, did he sow his wild oats. The scripture says that he traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. Other translations are more vivid - telling how he used it for drinking and parties and

women of all sorts. At any rate, before long, the party was over because it was all gone - every last red cent of his inheritance.

He had to swallow his pride and go to work, feeding pigs for a farmer. Yet, even there, he struggled and had no food - why, he would have eaten the food the pigs were given, but he had nothing.

Finally, the scripture says, "he came to himself," in other words, he came to his senses, and realized what he had done. So he determined to go back to his father and fall to his knees and beg for mercy for his foolishness, for the ways he had hurt him.

Frankly, he didn't expect much. He knew he had really, really hurt his father, and that he would never be welcomed home again, but he was willing to settle for being treated like one of his father's servants.

So off he went on the long walk home, no doubt rehearsing all the way, the words he would offer his father.

And then, just as he was nearing the family home, something incredible happened - so incredible that that son must have thought he was seeing things. His father was running towards him, with his arms wide open - running towards him, waiting to embrace him. It was unbelievable! Barely had the young son mumbled "I'm sorry," than the father called for the servants to bring a robe for the boy, and a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet - and to get a party started to celebrate his return! It was unbelievable! He was not only not being punished, he was being welcomed home with open arms and a party to beat the band!

What joy filled that father's heart, after having endured all that heartbreak. And oh, would that have been all he experienced that day. But no, it wasn't to be, because there was someone who wasn't at the party - and it was his other son.

The older son, you see, was out in the field working like the good son he had always been, and when he came in from the field, he heard the sounds of a party coming from the house. "What's going on?" he asked one of the servants. To which he received the absolutely astounding reply, "Your father is throwing a party for your younger brother, because he's come home, he's alive, all is well!"

I don't know about you, but I can almost see this older brother's head getting ready to explode. "A party, for that ingrate? A party, for that lazy, shiftless, irresponsible partyer? A party for the one who turned his back on the family, and left me to deal with everything? A party? You have got to be kidding me?"

And while he's standing there fuming, here comes his father out of the house

looking for him. Quite innocently, he invites his older son to come to the party to celebrate his brother's safe return, and boom, the older son hits the roof, and lets him have it. "Are you kidding me? All these years, I've been the one who stayed here and worked like a slave. I did everything you asked me to do, and yet what have you ever done for me? Now, he comes back, after blowing all your money, and you throw a party for him? Come into the party, not a chance!"

I think in that moment that father's heart broke a second time. The first, of course, was when the younger son left - the second, now, when his older son was so bitter he couldn't celebrate, and couldn't understand why he loved his younger son even in spite of his disobedience.

The sad thing is that the story ends right there - with an angry, bitter older son refusing to go into the house, and a father with his heart broken in two. When he told this parable, Jesus never told the end of the story. And I think He did that for a reason - He wanted His listeners, He wants us, to think about it - not just for their lives - but for our's.

So let's think about it together for a few moments - especially the older son's anger. Now, if you're like most good, church-going people, you get his anger, don't you? You get why he's mad. I mean, he's the good son, the one who followed the rules, the one who stayed - even if he was tempted to leave, he hung in there. He was the one who did whatever his father said, the one who was steady as a rock. You get that he's mad, because he did everything right, everything he was supposed to do, and now, the wild one, the young, irresponsible son, who did nothing right and a whole lot wrong, was being welcomed open with open arms and a wild party!

Yet, while we get it, while we understand his anger, we also need to realize what a toll his anger took on him, and what a toll anger can take on us.

First of all, he wasn't going to let it go, he was clinging on to his anger for dear life. And oh, isn't that tempting to do? Hold on to anger, cherish it almost. The great writer Frederick Buechner put it this way: "Of the seven deadly sins (he writes), anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontation still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback (he concludes) is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 117)

Buechner is absolutely right - that older brother was savoring his anger, and in the end, he was only hurting himself. Too often that's the case with any of us who hold onto our anger - we hurt ourselves.

I remember reading once about two monks who were walking through the

countryside together. They had both taken the vow of silence and the vow of cleanliness, which meant they couldn't speak and they couldn't touch anyone. As they walked along, they came to a stream, which was shallow, but whose water moved rapidly. As they prepared to cross the water, they noticed a woman stranded on the bank's edge, obviously afraid of the water and standing there helpless.

One of the monks just ignored her and crossed over the water. But the other, sensing her fear, all the while knowing that the rules of his order prevented him from speaking to her or touching her, but knowing too the law of Christ's love, went over to her, picked her up, carried her across the stream, then tenderly set her down on the solid ground. She thanked him profusely. He smiled and waved, and then walked on to join up with the other monk.

Suffice it to say that the other monk was furiously angry with what he had done for that woman. They walked along for a while, and the one monk got angrier and angrier, and finally, he couldn't hold it in any longer, and he turned to his brother monk and screamed, "How could you have done that? How could have you broken your vows like that? How could you have touched that woman?"

"She was afraid," the monk replied, "she needed help."

"You broke your vows!"

The second monk paused for a moment, and then answered, "Oh, my good brother, I dropped that woman off ten miles ago. Why are you still carrying her?"
(James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p.77)

You wonder when the older brother in the parable will drop his anger. You and I both know there are a lot of people in the world who choose to never drop it - they carry it around and it affects and infects everything. And oh, how it grieves God our Father.

A second thing about anger that we see in this parable is that it blinds us to what is good around us. We get tunnel vision and focus on what is angering us, and in the process fail to see all the good in our lives. That older brother was so focused on being angry at his younger brother that he forgot about all the good in his life - especially the goodness of his father. He never, for one second, stopped to consider what it cost his father to love his brother like that.

His father gave up the right for retribution and restitution. He had every right in the world to turn his back on his younger son, and leave him to fend for himself in a cruel world. No one would have blamed him, and in fact, surely there were many who thought him weak for being so easy on his wayward son. It

absolutely cost him to love like that - but love like that he did - and the older son was so busy being angry that he never noticed. And had he noticed, he would also see that that same love was there for him as well.

Anger clouds our perception of the world around us. (Just as an aside, think about the Pharisees and the scribes who were angry at Jesus in the **beginning** of the Gospel lesson - the same thing was true for them. They were so very angry at the people with whom Jesus was associating, that their anger made them unable to realize the depth of Jesus' love for all people. They were so determined to label some people worthy, and others not, that they failed to realize Jesus' love was big enough for all people - even them.) Anger does that - it blinds us to the good things in life - the good things of God.

Finally, the third thing I want to point out about anger, that was so evident in this story, is that it is more concerned about being right, than being in relationship. That older brother was so concerned that everybody know he was the one who was right, he was the one who had done the right thing - that he was willing to forfeit his family relationships.

You know what, friends? Sometimes you have to choose between being right, and being in relationship. Sometimes you have to decide which is more important. And with Jesus, it's always relationship.

When the Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for hanging out with the "wrong" people, they could back it up with scripture and verse of the law. Legally, they were right. But for Jesus, the law of love and grace took, and takes, precedence.

Sometimes you have to decide what is more important, being right, and standing your ground in anger because you know you're right, or being in relationship.

Thank goodness, friends, that we are children of our God who always wants to be in relationship with us. He is the Father in the story, you know - the One who welcomes home His children who have sinned with open arms, and the One who comes out into the yard to plead with us to let go of our anger, and come inside - into the arms of His love.

Oh, how I hope that older brother accepted that gift, and oh, how I hope we will too. May it be so.

Amen.