

“I HEARD AN OLD, OLD STORY: III – THE PRODIGAL SON”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Father’s Day

Luke 15:11-32

Father’s Day and Mother’s Day are usually big days in terms of attendance at church. Sons and daughters come out to be with their parent on those special days, and everybody is beaming. That is – most times. Because, you see, I read something recently where someone wrote about the pain of attending church on those Sundays for some people. The author spoke of the pain that can be experienced on Mother’s Day or Father’s Day if you are someone who, for instance, always wanted to be a parent but life didn’t give you that blessing. Or, the pain of hearing the virtues of great fathers and mothers being extolled in worship, if you happen to be someone who doesn’t have a virtuous father or mother, someone who more often criticized you or spoke to you in anger, than showered love on you.

Well, I try, and I think I do pretty well, in trying to be sensitive to those things, and I have to say, that on this Father’s Day, I think I’ve picked a pretty good scripture on which to preach – because I think it portrays a pretty complete picture of parent/child relationships. It’s a very familiar story to most of you – the parable of the Prodigal Son – and if ever there was a scripture that showed the reality of family relationships – this might be it – because it’s got a little bit of everything in it – which about describes most parent/child relationships.

Actually, I could have chosen any number of scripture passages on which to preach about family relationships, because there are so many in the Bible that show that families have issues just like anybody else. From the very beginning – (since it’s Father’s Day) there are father/son relationships and father/son issues – think about Adam and his sons Cain and Abel, Abraham and his sons Isaac and Ishmael, Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau – every one of those relationships fraught with some issues.

How many here grew up with siblings? Raise your hand, if you did. Well, every one of you knows about sibling rivalry, right? You’ve been through those times when you’ve thought, or maybe even said to a parent, “You like him/her better than me.”

Some families, like ours, even joke about it. We like to kid Mom and point out who we believe her favorite child is at any given time. She just shakes her head

and laughs. Trouble is that in some families, that feeling is real. Some do feel that their parents love one child more than another.

Well, I'm not sure about that, but I am sure that parents love each of their children in their own special way, and probably, have different types of relationships with each one.

Such seems to be the case with the family in this morning's parable. You know the story. A father has two sons. The younger one seems to be a bit of a free spirit, for one day he comes to his father, and pretty much says, "I'm outta here." He asks for his share of his inheritance ahead of time, and surprisingly, his father gives it to him. And off he goes, seeking the high life.

And for a while, he appears to have found it. The scripture says that he spent lavishly and caroused wildly, and lived extravagantly – and then one day, before he knew it, it was all down the drain. He had nothing and no one, and the adventure was over.

He was starving, doing anything he could to pick up some money to get something to eat, and somewhere to lay his head. Then one day, it came to him that his father's servants were probably making out better than he was, so why not go back home, throw himself on his father's mercy, and see what would happen?

It would be humiliating, of course, but this wild-child screwed up his courage and headed down the road back home. I'll bet he was rehearsing what to say the whole way.

Meanwhile, back at home this whole time, was a grieving father and his older son. The older son watched the pain on his father's face, the sadness in his eyes over his son leaving – all the while, of course, he's doing twice the work he should have had to do, cleaning up the mess his younger brother had left in his wake. He was dead tired, he was angry, it killed him to watch the toll it had taken on his father. But day in and day out, he did what he had to do, he did the right thing and carried on the family's work.

Which is exactly what he was doing, working out in the field, while not far away a solitary figure came walking towards their home, head down, deep in thought. It was his younger brother, and as he pondered what he would say, and what was to come, he lifted his head, and off in the distance, he saw someone coming toward him – coming toward him in a hurry – and before too long, he saw that it was his father, and he was moving ever faster and ever faster, running toward him, not in anger, but with his arms wide open, looking for all the world like he couldn't wait to take him in his arms and embrace him.

Which is exactly what he did. He wrapped his arms around his wayward son and with tears running down his face, welcomed him home, no questions asked. It had to have taken the younger son's breath away. It was nothing like he expected. He didn't have to grovel, he didn't have to confess – although he sure tried to – his father was just overwhelmed with joy and welcomed him back home.

He didn't yell at him, he didn't say "I told you so," he didn't say, "Tough on you, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps," he simply loved him and welcomed him home – no questions asked. Through all that he said and did he forgave his younger son and offered him a fresh start. And he threw him a great big rousing welcome home party as well, so that everyone could share their joy!

Never in a million years could that son ever have anticipated that kind of reception, never could he have imagined the depth of his father's love and forgiveness and grace.

Meanwhile, while all this drama is taking place, remember where the older son is? Exactly where you'd expect him to be – doing the right thing, being in the right place. He was out in the field doing work, hard work, the family's work – his share of work and his brother's share of work. He was working like he'd been working – doing double duty since his brother left – and he was probably dog-tired – but he was doing it.

He hears the commotion coming from up by the house and he asks what's going on and is astonished to hear that his wayward brother has returned, and even more astonished to hear how their father treated him, and absolutely stunned, and indeed outraged, to learn that his father was throwing him a lavish homecoming party!

He is filled with rage and resentment. It was so unfair! His brother had used everybody and everything, and he had stayed and followed the rules – for what? Nobody was throwing a party for him for doing the right thing? He was so angry he wouldn't even go inside.

And then, like his brother had on the road, he too looked up and saw his father come out toward him, with his arms wide open. He pleaded with his faithful, older son to come in and join in the rejoicing over his brother's return. Instead, what does he get in return? – screaming and shouting, anger and accusations.

"How about me? How about the fact that I stayed here the whole time and busted my back because he left us in the lurch? How about the fact that I didn't squander away your hard earned money? How about the fact that I stayed and supported you and saw your tears and your hurt? How about me? When do I get a party?"

He was right, you know? He did do the right thing all along the way. He was faithful. But he was so fixated on being right, that he turned his back on relationship – the relationship with his brother, but also his relationship with his father. He was more concerned about being right, than being in relationship.

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes about this moment in time and says:

“He wants his father to love him for all of that and his father does love him, but not for any of that, any more than he loves the younger brother for what he has done. He does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them, more because of who he is than because of who they are, and the elder brother cannot stand it. He cannot stand a love that transcends right and wrong, a love that throws homecoming parties for prodigal sinners and expects the hard-working righteous to rejoice. He cannot stand it and so he stands outside – outside his father’s house and outside his father’s love – refusing his invitation to come inside.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, “The Prodigal Father,” p. 166)

Oh, so fixated is he on evening the score and being right that he’s turned away from the relationship with his father. How incredibly sad!

You know, we don’t know how the story ends. When we last see him, the older son is standing outside the party, refusing to come in, stewing in his own juices. Maybe Jesus left it that way for a reason. Maybe he wanted his listeners – maybe he wants us to think about it, and whether or not we are like that brother at times.

Have there been times, or maybe are you doing it right now, when you were so concerned about being right, that you turned away from a relationship? When you were so resentful, that the last thing you’d ever consider was building a bridge of reconciliation? When you were so angry, that you closed off a piece of your heart?

Over the course of my ministry, I’ve seen it happen again and again. People holding grudges for years on end, cutting themselves off from family or friends. It’s incredibly sad. You know, I actually had a funeral service once where, like I always do, I met with the family and got a list of all their names for the pastoral prayer, which I used in the service. After the funeral was over, someone came rushing up to me, to ask why I hadn’t prayed for the other brother. I didn’t even know there was another brother – the family didn’t say a word about him – because they were estranged. I didn’t pray for him, because I didn’t even know he existed, because that’s how they were treating him. Grudges, hatred and resentment are terrible, malignant things.

And they hurt everybody, but you know who they hurt most of all – the one who holds them. Sure, the younger brother was hurt by his brother’s treatment and the father was devastated by it, but that older brother was poisoning his own heart most of all.

Writer James Moore tells about how once his family returned from vacation only to discover that their electricity had gone out a number of days before and everything in their refrigerator and freezer was totally spoiled. There was a turkey in the freezer and Moore says that as soon as they opened the door into the kitchen the horrible odor of the rotten turkey hit them in the face. They ended up throwing out everything in the refrigerator and the freezer – including the ice cube trays – because, as Moore said, “The stench of that spoiled turkey saturated everything.” (James W. Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, “Sins That Are Deceptive,” p. 59)

Well, in much the same way, the stench of resentment and unforgiveness saturates everything, saturates a person’s soul and changes him or her – so much so that they can look love and grace and forgiveness in the face, as that man did with his father - and refuse it.

I think Jesus wanted his listeners – us – to see the toll resentment and anger takes on us – and give it up. I think he wants us to be more concerned about relationships than being right.

And I think, most of all, he wants us to know that we are the sons in the story, and God is the father, and always, always, always, no matter what, God is running toward us with arms open to embrace us, love us, forgive us, and help us experience new life – no matter who we are and what we’ve done.

So if you find yourself in the place today where that younger son was – you’ve wandered away from where you should be, sinned, and squandered away what was precious – it’s not too late to come home into God’s embracing love.

Or if you’re the older son, with anger or resentment or a grudge sitting on your heart, it’s not too late to let it go – to give up the need to be right, in favor of being in relationship – with the one who has hurt you, and especially with the God who waits to embrace you in love.

Dear friends, on this Father’s Day, look up. Look up for your heavenly Father is reaching out for you with open arms of love, grace and forgiveness. Run into his embrace and go forth from this place in newness of life. May it be so. Amen.

