

Sermon for Lent IV Year C 2019
There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons

There was a man who had two sons . . .

So begins one of Jesus' best-known stories about unconditional love and about lost-ness.

We know it as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son."

When I was a little girl in Sunday school,
we learned about it as a story about a boy who ran away,
and a boy who stayed.

And a dad who threw a big party.

It was one of my favorite stories.

One of the reasons is that even though in my family I was actually
more like the "goodie-two-shoes" son who stays,

I always felt like the son who ran away,
the one in need of forgiveness.

It was surprising for me when I was an adult to hear
that this was not such a favorite story among others—
especially if you identify strongly with the older brother's
feelings of resentment and being overlooked.

While the parable itself is named for that boy who ran away,
Jesus was telling the parable primarily for the benefit
of the "boy[s] that stay"—those Pharisees and Scribes
who were so put out that Jesus was dining—celebrating?—
with the runaways—the sinners and tax collectors—
all those profligate, prodigal good for nothings.

It has been suggested by one preacher that this parable has grown
limp with all the hearings and handlings through the years.
Perhaps, in order to bring some punch back to this parable
we could enter into it through the perspective
of that older brother and the father.

So let's pretend we are privy to two letters—
One written by the son who stayed; the other by the father.

From the son who stayed . . .

Dear Dad,

Since we had words yesterday, I figured it might be a good idea to take a deep breath, sit down and think a bit.

I did that.

Now I want to put into writing exactly how I feel about what happened between us.

Dad, you have to admit that I've been a good son to you.

You never had to wonder where I was late at night.

If I wasn't in bed, I was out in the shop working on fixing a plow so it would be ready to go at the crack of dawn,

or tending one of our cows giving birth,

or investigating what I thought might have been a fox or a weasel sneaking around the chicken coop.

All day, every day, I work side by side with you under the noon day sun.

When the river busted its banks

and threatened to wipe out our entire wheat crop last spring,

I was right there with you and the hired hands, working until I could hardly stand.

If you will recall, that other son of yours was at home sleeping off a night of partying.

How many times did you have to go down to the police station or municipal court to bail that kid out of some sort of trouble?

How many times did he come home so drunk he couldn't find the front door?

I'm afraid I've lost count.

See, here's the thing Dad.

It's always been about him.

You were always fretting about your beloved younger son—

“What's wrong with the poor boy?

Why does he seem so angry?

Why is he always getting into trouble?”

Don't think I haven't noticed the tears you tried so hard to hide from the rest of us, the tears you shed for him.

Well guess what, Dad.

You have two sons.

I guess because I never made any trouble for you, you never bothered to notice me.

You never stopped to think about what might be bothering me.

Yes, growing up was tough for me, too.

Yet it always seemed you treated me as though I wasn't even there.

But I want to tell you Dad, I am here!

I've always been here!

I have been pouring my blood, sweat, and tears into this little farm from the time I could pick up a tool.

But I never heard you say, "Thanks son," or

"Good job, son," or

"Why don't you take the evening off and a good time with your buddies on me."

Nope! No sir!

Not a single word.

Not one slap on the back, ever.

I was hoping, praying that once that son of yours took his share of the estate and left, maybe, just maybe, you would notice me and appreciate me.

But no, all you did was worry and fret over that self-centered brat.

You never even looked my way!

You just kept your eye on the road waiting for the runaway to come back.

And, sure enough, when that son of yours came back, filthy, ragged, and smelling like a pig,

you couldn't run fast enough to embrace him, shower him with tears,

give him a new robe and a ring,

and here's the biggest slap in the face of all—

you kill for him the fatted calf and throw a big party!

And you wonder why I am upset?

You wonder why I don't want to join the celebration?
That son of yours has given you nothing but grief,
but for him you kill the fatted calf.
I have given you nothing but obedience and respect,
and you haven't even given me a lousy goat.
Go figure.
Your son, the one who stayed.

From the father of the two sons . . .

Dear Son,
I have read your letter to me with interest.
And I have to admit, you are right about a couple of things.
It's true that I have never thanked you for doing your chores
and behaving yourself.
But I don't recall your ever thanking your mother or me
for the three meals a day you have gotten all of your life,
the clothes on your back
or the roof you sleep under every night.
That's all right; I don't expect any thanks for that.
It's what a father and mother owes their son—
just as a son owes his father and mother obedience and respect.
No thanks due in either direction, as I see it.
Furthermore, as I told you yesterday,
everything I have is yours.
Your brother squandered his share of the inheritance and that's gone.
You are next in line to get the farm,
so I haven't given to your brother anything
that rightfully belongs to you.

But I have given you a lot more than just this farm.
As you point out, we have spent the better part of our lives working
side by side together.
Don't you remember all those afternoons we sat exhausted
in the shade of the elm trees at the edge of the field sharing our lunch,
joking with the hired hands
and singing those old songs of Zion together?

Your brother missed out on all of that.
Remember the sense of satisfaction we felt every year at harvest time
when we loaded sack after sack of grain on the ox cart,
how we marveled at that ageless miracle of the full grain coming from
those tiny seeds we planted with such care
and how we watched over the field like worried mother hens?
Your brother will never know that joy either.

What I am trying to tell you, son, is that there is no reward for loyalty,
devotion, and hard work.
These things are their own reward.
It's like I told you yesterday.
You are always with me and everything I have is yours.
We've shared our lives together.
What more can a father give to his son?

You are also right about something else.
I love your brother—yes, *your brother*—
the one you keep referring to as “that son of yours.”
I love him.
But what is that to you?
Do you think love is a finite quantity like land or cattle or money?
Do you think love is something limited,
so that if I spare any love on your brother there is less for you?
No, my son.
You can overspend your bank account.
You can over mortgage your land and lose it.
But you can never exhaust the well of love for the people around you.
In fact, here's the mystery about love:
the more people you love and the more deeply you love them,
the more love you have to share.
And that's because the source of love is not in your own heart,
but in the heart of God, our heavenly Father.
Because God loves us all so much,
we have a bottomless well of love to draw on for each other.

You think my love is wasted on your brother.
But that's because you have somehow gotten the notion that love is a reward for obedience, for good behavior or great accomplishments.
Your problem, son, is not that you are unloved.
Your problem is that you have no idea how deeply loved you really are.
You have been trying so hard all your life to earn my love that you never allowed me simply to give it to you.
Your brother may have wasted his father's money, but you have been wasting your father's love.
Now, tell me, which do you think is the greater loss?
Who is really the prodigal one here?

Make no mistake about it.
You are a good son.
You work hard and that makes life easier for both of us.
But that isn't why I love you.
I love you because you are my son and that is what fathers do.
I'd love you just as much if you were as reckless and irresponsible as that knuckle head brother of yours.

That brings me to my final point.
Just as I embraced your brother and welcomed him home, so now you need to do the same.
No, he doesn't deserve it.
But I hope by now I have convinced you that love has nothing to do with deserving.
Your brother did not deserve the party I gave him.
But he needed it.
He needed to be shown that, as much as his actions may have hurt and deeply disappointed me, he is still my son and this is still his home.

And you, son, need to learn that,
as faithful and obedient as you have been all these years,
I love you *not* for that reason but because you are my boy.

What will it take for you to lean into celebration?

To try out mercy as a balm?
Your brother is home. He's done breaking hearts for the time being.
Now, I your father, stand in the doorway waiting for you.
Waiting for you to come home.
Waiting for you to take hold the fullness
of the inheritance that has always been yours.
Did you know that your choices are so powerful?
You get to write this ending.
You get to write this ending.
It's getting cold outside.
The sun is setting and the party is still going and
you are invited.
What will you do? What will you choose?
Will you choose mercy?
Will you choose joy?
Will you choose love and decide to stay or
will you choose anger and resentment and walk away?

As I have told you before, son,
I have given you all that I am and all that I have.
Now nothing could make this old father happier
than to see his two sons embrace and to celebrate and rejoice together.
With my deepest love,
Your Dad

We can either insist on regarding one another from a human point of
view or we can choose to be ambassadors of Christ
and work side by side with him in the ministry of reconciliation.

Won't you pray with me again the prayer of the day—
on page 4 of the bulletin.

*God of compassion, you welcome the wayward, and you embrace us all with
your mercy. By our baptism clothe us with garments of your grace, and feed
us at the table of your love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who
lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.*

And in a few moments, the feast for all sinners and saints will begin.