

It's a Pity to Pout at the Party

Text: Isaiah 40:27; Luke 15:28, 31

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The parable of the Prodigal Son, as I indicated last week, is misnamed. It is really a story of a father with two sons, and it's not really about the two sons so much as about the father. It is about the incredible, amazing love of the father who is, in the story Jesus told, a symbol for God. This story is about the love of God, and it was told, initially, because there were those of the religious leadership that were grumbling because Jesus was receiving all kinds of people without condition, sitting at table with them, breaking bread with them. He told this story in order to respond to that criticism and that condemnation of his ministry.

Last week we focused on the younger son who was a rebel who sought his freedom, or better, his autonomy. And we noted that Jesus just might have been saying it is necessary to separate and to move out in the natural, normal maturation process. But, it's a very perilous move and it can lead to self-destructive behavior, decadence and despair. But, he told not only of that younger son who left home; he told, also, of the elder brother who stayed home. And just as the younger son in his move from home cut himself off from that whole spiritual legacy that was his and became homeless, so Jesus says in this story, the elder brother living all of his days at home righteously, responsibly, faithfully, seriously, nonetheless was just as homeless as his younger brother. For Jesus was saying that it is possible to be homeless by leaving or by staying, but failing to delight and to bask in the love of God that is the mark of the house of God. The younger son broke the father's heart because he left. The elder brother just as surely broke the father's heart because he stayed without joy.

And so, for a bit this morning, having focused on the younger son last week, let's linger with that elder brother a bit because, as I said last week, probably Jesus was not talking about two kinds of persons so much as the two persons that live within us. Is there not the rebel in us whose recklessness can lead to decadence, as well as the diligent, elder brother whose serious obedience is given grudgingly, without joy? Don't we know moments in our lives when we are the one and the other? So, for a time, think with me about that elder brother.

The story is a sad story. It's a sad story because it's always a pity to pout at a party, and there was a party going on. There was a celebration. The elder brother coming in from the field hears the sound of singing and dancing and he calls a servant to say, "What's the meaning of this?"

I wonder, what do you think? I suspect he knew what was going on, don't you? Don't you suspect he knew the father well enough to suspect that maybe the young rascal came home and all of the joy and celebration was about that? And I wonder if he didn't call the servant to confirm his suspicions in order not to have to go too close and be drawn into the circle of light and celebration. It's a sad story because, hearing the news, we're told that he was angry and he would not go in. He stayed outside the party, paralyzed, as it were, by that anger that welled up within him and erupted, probably surprising him, himself. There he stands. Can you get into his skin? The best way to hear the word of God is to put ourselves in the characters. Have you been there? Have you felt that kind of resentment and anger overcoming you in a moment, so unexpectedly that it absolutely paralyzed you, and you were consumed with a fury and a wrath that even scared you a bit? That's the sad story of the elder brother. I suspect that we've all been there on occasion, because I suspect that there are more elder brothers and sisters in church than younger rebels who have returned.

Well, in a congregation like Christ Community, there are some rebels who've returned. But, by and large, we are the folks who stayed home, aren't we? We are the folks who've been serious and responsible and diligent and faithful, while the masses have left, seemingly rather carefree and reckless. Apparently they could not care less about whether the church lives or dies. I mean, we've stayed home, haven't we? We've taken upon ourselves the heavy burden for keeping the church alive, for God's sake. So, I suspect that when I ask you to get inside the skin of the elder brother, probably many of us here have been there a time or two. The elder brother is a type that is found often in church, because the elder brother was a good and righteous and serious and faithful and diligent and responsible person. But the thing that he didn't realize was that underneath, he was also a very angry person, full of resentment.

I have a large library and I love books, and one of the most beautiful books in my library is a book by Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic priest. You've probably read some of Nouwen's works; he's written a number of things - contemplative, meditative, about the spiritual life. Very fine writer. This book is called *The Return of the Prodigal*, and it's bound beautifully, and it is a meditation on his contemplation of Rembrandt's painting of the return of the Prodigal, and there are several colored plates of that painting in various scenes sprinkled throughout the book. That text is Nouwen's encounter with that painting. He tells about a time in his life when he was worn out, he had been carrying on his ministry, he had been teaching and traveling, he had been engaged in Latin America, concerned about the injustices there. He was really burning out and he came to a point when he knew that it was time for him to take a sabbatical or change his

course or something, and he went into an office and there he saw a poster of this painting of the return of the Prodigal, and something in it drew him and he was drawn to it and struck by it and he saw the embrace of the aged father embracing the son, kneeling, weeping at his feet. Nouwen said, "I saw myself in that return of the younger son. I so yearned and longed for the embrace and the touch of the father. I needed to come home."

It was a short time later that he was invited to travel to Russia and he went to St. Petersburg, formerly Leningrad, where in The Hermitage Gallery, is the original of the Rembrandt painting. Through special arrangements he was enabled to spend hours sitting in front of that painting, just contemplating it, seeing himself in the painting, thinking about Rembrandt, thinking about all of the dynamics of that painting, finding in himself that longing to be held by the father and to go home. He did change his career, of course, and he settled in and things began to move for him again and he shared with a friend one day that he identified with that younger son who'd been embraced by the father, and the friend said to him, "Henri, don't you really think that you're the elder brother?" And it took him aback.

Then he began to think about it and he began to study the elder brother and think of his own life, and he said, "I had to conclude I was the elder brother." He said, "At the age of six I was already committed to the priesthood. I was the oldest child of the family. All of the expectations of the eldest child were upon me. All of my life I had tried to please; I had tried to measure up. All of my life I had been serious and responsible; I had obeyed my parents; I had obeyed my teachers; I had obeyed my bishops. I had given my whole life to the service of God. And as I thought about myself as the elder brother, I had to admit that there was some subterranean stream in me of resentment and of anger." He said, "I never cut loose, I never kick up my heels, and yet as I thought about my life at that point in my life, I recognized that there was a subtle anger within me and a resentment over against those who had been reckless and careless and seemingly to have gotten away with it. I was resentful about those who could go out and turn the tables upside down and then come back repentant and receive all grace. The more I thought about it, the more I recognized that it was me in that picture, that I was the one, underneath, resentful and angry for all of the diligence and all of the faithful service I had rendered."

And Nouwen identified that which is the central characteristic of the elder brother, which is an anger that manifests itself in resentment. And it is a serious disease, and there are few of us who escape it totally, for whether we be the elder child like Nouwen or some other scenario is written over our lives, as a matter of fact, most of us at some time have to own up to having held a pity party, that "poor me" syndrome, the fact that I've tried so hard, I've worked so hard, I've been so faithful, I've been so righteous, and nobody really appreciates it; nobody really appreciates me. Who would ever throw a party for me? So, if there's a party around, I'm going to pout at the party because I'm feeling sorry for myself.

I think Nouwen put his finger on that besetting sin of good people. It is doing everything right and hating it. It is being absolutely square and resenting it. And it doesn't take simply a child-parent relationship. The elder brother was resentful against the father, but those of us who are parents can pull the same trick on our children. Now, I'm sure there's not a father or a mother here that has ever given even a hint to a son or a daughter that, in light of the sacrifice that we've made for our sons or daughters, one might think that a phone call or a visit might have been in order. I'm sure that there's not a parent here who has ever felt sorry for themselves over against the tremendous job we've done in nurturing and raising and working hard and scraping and sacrificing for our children, and look what we get! And, it doesn't even have to be within the family. It can be among colleagues; it can be among friends. "Look what a friend I've been to so-and-so. Do you think that there's any reciprocity, any appreciation? In fact, as I think about it, nobody really appreciates me and I really do feel sorry for myself, and when somebody's having a good time and celebrating, I'm going to be outside, pouting at the party, because I am so angry."

And the problem is no one can do anything for you because the problem's inside. It's a kind of feeling of inadequacy, a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. And so, it doesn't matter how much affirmation we get. It doesn't matter how many kudos are sent our way. It's because we don't love ourselves and respect ourselves enough and we can't believe anybody else would love and respect us. I think that's sort of what's going on with the elder brother syndrome.

I see this in the Church because, again, I think we in the Church tend to be more the elder brother than the younger rebel. I ran into it in 1988 when I wrote that article on the extent of God's grace, and I found that people were really angry to think that perhaps the grace of God was broader than the scope of our human imagination, that maybe the grace of God could embrace even those who were outside our serious, dedicated, diligent, faithful, responsible commitment to the kingdom of God. At that time, a colleague of mine was quoted to me as saying, "If he believed the grace of God was that broad, he would give up the ministry and start selling used cars."

We've experienced it recently again, haven't we? The *Detroit Free Press* headlines said, "If Dick Rhem Is Right, the Heart of the Gospel is Cut Out." That sounds to me an awful lot like those grumbling people who condemned Jesus for breaking bread with those who were outside the acceptable parameters. What is there about the Church? Do we feel put upon because we have stayed home? Do we feel jealous of those who have simply left? Do we resent the fact that we have a commitment to be faithful to the mission of the Church and to the broader kingdom of God? Do we do it, but do we hate it?

It's such a pity, because the kingdom of God is about dancing and singing and feasting. It is to be a banquet. It is to be a ball. And it's a pity to pout at a party, but the Christian Church members are not the most spontaneous, joyful people in

the world, but we should be. So, whether it's in our individual lives or whether it's in our corporate lives, it's a rather sobering thing to size up the elder brother and then see the contours written in our own hearts.

But, again, this story isn't about those two boys at all. It's about God. And the thing I think I never really appreciated in this old, old story, although I would have thought that there wasn't another phrase in it that could have passed me by in the many years of my life, but the thing that amazes me is that the love of God is absolutely consistent over against the younger rebel and the older pouter. For, just as God the father runs to meet the youngster who is returning, so the father leaves the party and comes out into the darkness to plead with the elder son, and the word he uses in the Hebrew language does not mean "son," but "my child;" it is the word of affection. The father comes out to this elder son and pleads with him to come and the elder son begins a tirade, listing all of his credentials and all of his responsible actions and behavior, holding up to the father the dissolute life of "this son of yours," whom he doesn't even claim as "my brother." The anger just spews out of him! He can't contain it anymore. The dam bursts! To which the father says, "My child, all I have is yours. You are always with me."

No accusation. No condemnation. Not of the younger one. Not of the older one. Just, "Look, look, I love you and I value you, and everything I have is yours."

Unconditional love. If it's amazing that over against the younger one, he could let him go and love him still, this is absolutely incredible. I mean, it's not so hard to take a rascal back, is it? Particularly when the kid's weeping at your feet? One can embrace such a youngster. But, this elder brother standing stiffly in his self-righteous pride, resentful and angry, spewing out to the father all of hurts over all of the years - to love that one? Well, I might have gone out, but I sure would have let him know how disgusted I was with his behavior. And then if he wouldn't have come in, I would have said, "Then stay there and rot!"

But, you see? That's the amazing nature of the love of God. Jesus couldn't portray it any more vividly. It's not simply a greater degree of our love. It is a love divine. It is the love of God. And right now I think there's some of you that may feel a kind of constriction in your innards because you know that it is your nature to pout at the party. And I wish I knew how to set you free. I wish I knew how to set your tongue to singing and your feet to dancing, to lead you into the spontaneity of joyful celebration. I know what you need, what you yearn for - it is to be loved, it is to be valued. And I wish for just a moment this morning you could really hear Jesus, really hear the story, really put yourself in the skin of the elder son, acknowledge it, confess it, own it and then let the love of God wash over you. I tell you, it is so transforming, if once you feel it.

Friday night Nancy and I were invited to the Sabbath service of the Muskegon Temple where I was invited to give the sermon. In 1984, in Schenectady, that congregation that I served for three months had an annual exchange with the Jewish community in Schenectady and, while I was there, that exchange took

place and we went to the Sabbath service in the temple. I have to tell you, I couldn't be free. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to pray. I wasn't even sure if Jesus' name wasn't attached to the prayer, if it was ... I mean, that's where I was. I was thinking about all of these things, and what I want to say to you is that, in that experience, I wasn't present with those people. I was there in body, but I wasn't present with them.

Friday night it was quite different, because I know, I have experienced enough now to know those are God's beloved children, and I could rejoice when the candles of the Sabbath were lighted and when the bread was blessed and when the wine was poured. It was such an enriching, warming, human experience. And I could sing. And I could dance. And I could be there.

Because, you see, the Kingdom of God is about a love that is so incredible that it far exceeds the measure of our lives, and God would have each one of us know down in our depths that we are valued and loved and hallowed, whether we've kicked up the traces or kept plowing the furrows. Whether we've been wild and decadent, or righteous and resentful - God wants us home. God wants us to know we're loved, and if you could believe that this morning, if you could feel that this morning, it would be wonderful, because it's such a pity to pout at a party!

Reference:

Henri J. M. Nouwen. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. Doubleday, 1992.