

A Tale of Two Sons

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday in Lent, March 5, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 34:1-8; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The parable of the Prodigal Son has been called the gospel within the gospel, the most beautiful short story ever told. It's found only in Luke's Gospel. I believe that at the heart of this story Jesus has described in words what the heart of God the Father is like. The central figure in the parable is not the younger or the older brother, but the waiting Father.

1. Three times in this story the father makes loving moves: the first comes when the father gives the younger son what he wants. "Father, give me my share of the property now." Now it's not always the loving thing to give your children what they want but there comes a time when you know you've-got-to-let-them-go. The father heard the selfishness in his younger son's voice and he saw the rebellion in his eyes. He could have given him a lecture on how hard he'd work for what he had and he wasn't about to give it to a boy who didn't know the value of a dollar. But he gave the boy what he wanted, not out of complacency, not out of weakness, but *out of love*. "Maybe that's the only way he's going to learn."

Now Jesus seems to be saying that this is what God is like. This is part of the love of God. Sometimes God gives us what we want. If we want to go, he let's us go. You can take all that God has given you, your brains, your body, your creativity, your ambition and leave the Father's house. And many do; some when they're confirmed; some when they graduate from high school and enter the service or go off to college; some when the demands of work become overwhelming. They leave their Father's home.

That's what the younger son did. "He went to a country far away, where

he wasted his money in reckless living. He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat."

He was hungry. He was physically hungry. But I believe the boy hungered more than anything for his father's home and for his family. The prodigal son lost not only his fortune in the far country, he lost his friends, and above all he lost his relationship to his father and family. He thought that if he had freedom and enough money he could live without the most significant relationships in his life (A lot of us feel that way at times in our lives). But he couldn't. He found that in the far country he had ~~friends only as long as he had money.~~

"At last he came to his senses and said, 'All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.'" So he got up and started back to his father."

The boy makes no excuses. He doesn't blame the famine and he doesn't blame his friends for forgetting about him. He admits that he's sinned. That's what every single one of us do when we return to the home of our heavenly Father. Some people who *don't* go to church think that people who *do* go to church *think* they're better than others. That's not true. We go to church, we return to the Father's house, because we know we've sinned and need forgiveness. There's a general confession of sin at the beginning of every worship service. It reminds us that we're here, not because we think we're better than other people, but because we're hungry and we need

the Father's forgiveness.

2. And this brings us to the second series of loving moves that the father makes. "He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him." I imagine that every night after work the father stood at the top of the hill, maybe for years. He stood and looked out over the valley and hills, searching the distant far country for some movement on the horizon, wondering, "Will my son every come home? Will I ever see my boy again?" And one day he sees a dot moving on the horizon. It's his son. So he runs. Picture the father running down the valleys and up the hills, running to his son. Now in that part of the world it wasn't considered dignified for a grown man to run; yet, he runs and he throws his arms around his son, and kisses him. I can't help but see Jesus in the Father's actions. In Jesus, I see the very heart of God. I see God, our heavenly Father, running to us, stretching out his arms on the cross for us. I think of the words of Paul in our epistle lesson, "All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends."

Notice that the boy wants to confess his sins but the father doesn't wait for the confession. Before the boy can finish his confession of sin the father calls his servants, "Hurry! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found."

In that series of actions, the embrace, the ring, the sandals and the feast, I see something of the love God shows us by giving us the sacraments; visible and tangible signs of his love. In the sacraments God embraces us. He touches us physically and not just spiritually. In Baptism

God tells us, "You are my son. You are my daughter. You were dead and buried and now you have risen to new life. In you I am well pleased." The sacrament of Holy Communion is sometimes called the Eucharist. The *Eu* in Eucharist means "good", and *charis* is the root of our word "caress". The Lord's Supper is God's good caress. In it God embraces and kisses us and says, "I love you. You are forgiven".

3. The third loving action of the father is seen in relation to the older brother. But before I can tell you what that third loving action is I have to set the stage. The Greek word for "older" son, believe it or not is *presbuteros*. He's the "Presbyterian" son. The Presbyterian, naturally, was out in the field hard at work. He was doing what he ought to be doing, going to church, serving on the session, participating in committees, ~~involved in the community and working for peace, love and justice in the~~ world. But after a hard days work he approached his father's house and heard the sound of music and it wasn't Bach. And dancing. Dancing! Presbyterians have always been a little suspicious of fun going on in the Father's house so he called one of the servants and asked him, "What's going on?" "Your brother has come back home," the servant answered, "and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound." The older brother was so angry that he wouldn't go in.

And here's the third loving move that the father makes. "The father came out and begged him to come in." Begged him! Outside! Publicly, where everybody can see and hear! Now, Fathers in those days just didn't beg their children. And even today it's embarrassing to see a father or a mother begging children. It's so demeaning; so humiliating. And yet Jesus tells us this is what God is like. God is reduced to begging. And God is still begging. St. Paul writes, "Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as

though God himself were making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends!" Please! I beg you!

Then the insolent older brother talks back to his father. "Look, all these years I've worked for you like a slave, and I've never disobeyed your orders." Slavery is how he thinks of his work for his father. It's all been a duty. How many of us think that going to church, obeying God's laws, working for peace and justice in the world and in the community is nothing more than our duty. We slave away and no body appreciates all the work we do. Others play and waste their time on themselves but we work. The angry son finishes, "When this son of yours comes back who has wasted all your property on prostitutes, you kill the prize calf for him!" The eldest son is saying, "I don't get you. I think you're weak." He thinks his father lacks character and backbone. He thinks he lacks basic, ordinary justice. "It's just not fair."

"My son," the father answered. There are two Greek words he could have used here for "son". He used the more tender of the two. "My son," he said, "you're always here with me, and everything I have is yours." Those words mean that God loves, not only prodigals who have returned from the far country, he also loves Presbyterians, the older brothers and sisters who've never left home. He loves those in the church who, perhaps, have never really understood this talk about the grace of God; who've never really had any deep feelings of sinfulness; who've always felt they've done their duty; who really don't know what to make of these "born again Christians"; who don't really feel comfortable with these crazy charismatic Christians who dance and celebrate like fools in their worship services. He loves those who, though they've never left the Father's home

physically, have never enjoyed a personal relationship with God as Father.

I've heard too often preachers lambasting the older brothers and sisters as hypocrites and pious prigs, nominal Christians. But God loves them too. God comes out and begs them to come in and says, "My son, my daughter... everything I have is yours. Won't you please come in?"

This is the message of the story. To all prodigals, God is making his appeal through me this morning: "Come home, the Father is waiting to embrace you. Our message is that God was making all mankind his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of our sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes us his friends."

And to all older brothers and sisters: Come into the house, enjoy the music and the dancing and the feast. The Father is good. Don't shut yourselves out. I'm speaking this morning for Christ. God himself is making his appeal through me. "Don't be angry with me because I freely forgive sinners and welcome outcasts and even eat with them. Let me change you from enemies into my friends!"

This is a revision of a message by F. Dale Brunner given at the Presbyterian Congress on Renewal (CT, October 4, 1985).