

**PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE --
THE ELDER SON IN THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON**

(08/11/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-2)

As you know, the theme that Charley and I have been exploring this summer is interesting people or characters of the Bible. We have been focusing on some of the people who usually fly under the radar, people who are not well known. As you have hopefully begun to realize, some of them are indeed real characters!

I like this summer’s theme for several reasons. First, it reminds us that the Bible is about people. It is the story of people in their life journeys, journeys that take place in relationship with God. The Bible employs a narrative style of teaching. To be sure, not everyone in the Bible deepens his/her relationship with God. Several demonstrate what a life looks like when a person rejects God or worships the wrong god.

As you know, I try to eschew political commentary in my sermons, but I suspect we all could think of people in our country and around the world who don’t know God, who have rejected God, or who are worshipping the wrong God, including a few politicians and the people who are in thrall to these politicians, who are committing the sin of idolatry in making these politicians into God. A current local example that comes to mind is the troglodyte or troglodytes that destroyed or defaced symbols of inclusion like rainbow banners and pride flags that graced the front of several churches in our area: symbols of healing, expressions of acceptance and love for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, our LGBTQ children, siblings, or parents, our LGBTQ pastors or fellow parishioners. What I find particularly galling in this brazen expression of prejudice and discrimination is that it was done in the name of Jesus by someone who identifies him/herself and certainly considers him/herself a Christian.

The person or persons who did this must believe in a Jesus who teaches us to hate and discriminate against people who are different from us in any way. I confess that I don’t see that in the teachings of Jesus and the way Jesus touched people’s lives, including my life. In our prayers, let us give thanks and express our support for Christ Lutheran Church and First Congregational Church in Natick, First Congregational Church in Norwood, First Congregational Church in Sharon, and St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Framingham for the spirit of inclusion, acceptance, and love in their churches and for taking a stand against these expressions of primitive tribalistic ignorance and hatred. But I digress.

Getting back to our sermon series, we note that most of the people in the Bible are ordinary everyday people. To be sure, there are some saints in the Bible, but they are definitely in the minority. The people in the Bible are very human, very much like us. And this includes Jesus, as we noted two weeks ago in the account of his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Finally, as we know, the narratives of the Bible can be read, can be understood as telling us what certain historical people said and did. However, this is not the only way to read the Bible. We can view the people of the Bible from a symbolic as well as a factual, historical perspective. When we view the biblical narrative from an intra-psychic rather than an interpersonal perspective, the same way we would approach a dream, a myth, or a fairy tale, we realize that all the characters of the Bible are a part of us.

If we approach the Parable of the Prodigal Son from a symbolic perspective, looking at the characters in the story just as we would if we were interpreting a dream, a fairy tale, or a myth, the younger son can be seen as a part of us. However, his older brother, too, is a part of us. In some ways we may be like the errant son; in some ways we may be like the responsible son. Remember, all the characters of the Bible, even Jesus, can be seen as a part of us.

Since the Parable of the Prodigal Son appears only in the gospel of Luke, it must have been part of an oral or written tradition that was available to Luke but not to the other gospel writers. If it had been available to Matthew and Mark, I am sure they would have included it in their gospels, for I believe it contains the most important of Jesus' teachings. It tells us something about God. It also tells us something about us.

Just out of curiosity, how many of you here this morning identify with the younger son in this parable, the son who makes a mess of his life, finally comes to his senses, turns his life around, and returns home sadder but wiser? Could I have a show of hands? Interesting. How many of you identify with the dutiful elder son, the son who did whatever his father, his society, his church, or God could expect of him? Could I have a show of hands? Aha! It's just as I thought!

How many of you believe people should get what they deserve in life, and the younger son, who made a mess of his life, got off too easy? Could I have a show of hands? How many of you hope that, when we come before God, we *don't* get what we deserve? May I have a show of hands? It's just as I thought!

How many of you are already getting tired of these questions? Could I have a show of hands? Aha, it's just as I thought!

Let's go back to the elder son. I think it is interesting that the account of the elder son's dialogue with his father was included in the parable. It didn't need to be. The parable is a powerful teaching all on its own without it. I think its inclusion means that this father-son dialogue is an important part of the central message of the parable.

This parable is commonly regarded as a teaching about sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Despite the few references to how happy the angels in heaven become when one sinner repents, quotes that really don't fit the basic message of the parable and which I doubt should be attributed to Jesus, I do not think that this parable is a teaching about sin and salvation, about repentance and forgiveness. There is no evidence that the father forgives his errant son. He doesn't even hear his son's confession. The parable is really about unconditional love, a love that will not let us go, no matter how far we wander from the path—*or even if we don't wander from the path*. It is this that ties the main body of the parable to the father's dialogue with his elder son.

Let me ask you one more question. You don't have to raise your hands, since you have already had enough of that, and I would rather you didn't yell out your answer. What did the elder son do wrong? He did everything his father asked or expected of him. He was hardworking and responsible, a parentified child, a "chip off the old block." He did not "squander his inheritance in dissolute living." (I love that—people don't say "dissolute living" anymore!) He didn't make a mess of his life and have to hit bottom before he came to his senses. He did life the "right" way.

So, if the father in the story is God, and if we are either the rebellious or the dutiful child, why isn't it better to be responsible than irresponsible? Doesn't God want us to be good, moral, responsible people? If God wants us to be good, moral, responsible people, then why does Jesus trash the elder son in the parable? If the message is about sin, repentance, and forgiveness, why does the son who never sins come off looking so bad? And, deep down, we know he does.

I think it is because the deep meaning of life and the essence of what it means to be a Christian is not reducible to living an upright and moral life. I have heard people say that their religion is the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. This makes morality the meaning of life and the central focus of our religion, which would certainly make sense if we viewed religion from a sociological perspective.

But what a strange meaning that would be for this mysterious and miraculous life that God has created! It implies that the most important part of life and of our relationship with God is this matter of sin. Since we human beings cannot avoid sinning, however one defines it, our sin needs to be washed away through the substitutionary death of Jesus. I don't see how this can be the meaning of the life that God created, evolved, and continues to evolve in and through us!

The Parable of the Prodigal Son suggests that life is like a journey. In the parable, of course, it is depicted as an outward journey, but I think we know that it is an inward more than an outward journey. Life is a spiritual journey, a journey not toward perfection but toward individuation, toward wholeness and uniqueness. On this journey we become conscious of God and deepen our relationship with God. When we do this, we realize that we are precious incarnations of God's creative Spirit. And so is everyone else! *Everyone!*

In order to become the authentic and unique human beings that God calls us to be, we need to become conscious of our shadow, the parts of us that we judge negatively because they don't fit neatly into our persona, the mask that we show to the world. These are the parts of us that, because they do not fit our image of how we would like to be *or how we would like to be seen*, we try to hide away. Rather than repress this part of ourselves or project it outward onto some individual or group of people who are different from us, we need to integrate this part of our psyche into consciousness in a healthy way.

Like the younger son in the parable, we may need to leave home, both literally and symbolically. We may need to individuate from our family of origin and the expectations that are placed upon us by the collective consciousness of our society, of our culture, even of our religion. This is why the younger son, who embarks upon a journey into the wilderness, is the more deeply spiritual of the two brothers. He is not the more religious; the elder son is more religious. But the elder son is less spiritual. By living his life out of a set of moral rules, a set of moral standards, he misses the true meaning of his life!

As Marcus Borg has noted in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for The First Time*, Jesus preached and taught a counter-cultural message, a counter-cultural spirituality. He not only argued against the purity laws that led the observant Jew to feel superior to women, lepers, tax collectors, and Gentiles, he actually went out of his way to break these laws. This is clearly stated in today's scripture lesson:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus tells us that there is more to this precious life that has been given us than following the Ten Commandments and strictly observing the purity code. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is not a call to purity; about being pure. It is about the importance of the spiritual journey for our own individuation! This kind of journey shapes a person's soul in a different way than a life that is lived according to the Law. Not that it is wrong to live a good and moral life, a conventional and culturally acceptable life, a responsible and dutiful life. It is just that Jesus calls us to more! In addition, the kind of life that we see personified in the elder brother can give rise to hubris, to a false sense of pride.

Successfully walking the conventional path in life can lead one to feel superior to those who have been disadvantaged from birth by being members of a minority group, or to those who have been less than responsible stewards of the precious life that God has given them. The elder son archetype can get in the way of a compassionate response to our brothers and sisters who are hurting, who are struggling with life. It finds expression in statements like "That welfare mother is living in poverty because of her own bad choices; why should I give my hard-earned money to help her out?" "That person who died of a drug overdose put the pills in his mouth or the needle in his arm. Why should I feel compassion for him?" "Let the migrants go back where they came from, where they belong. Why should we share our school systems with their children?"

I believe that the elder brother is a sinner. He is a sinner in the sense of the Greek word that the Bible translates as sin, *hamartia*, which means to miss the mark. He is living his life off center. The real sin of the elder brother is not that he has made a mess of his life, that he has made bad choices, that he has squandered his inheritance in dissolute living. His sin is that he does not love! He lives a good and moral life, but he does not feel even a twinge of compassion for his younger brother! When he hears that his brother has returned, he is not the least bit happy! He has absolutely no feeling for his brother, for what his brother has gone through! It is all about *him*, about why he and his friends never had a party! He even refuses to go to his brother's welcome-home celebration. He clings to his self-righteous sense of moral superiority, taking pride in the fact that he has never had to ask his father for forgiveness.

This is his crime, and it is a serious one! If the greatest of all the commandments is that we love the Lord our God *and that we love our brother and sister as ourself*, then the elder brother has violated the fundamental tenet of his religion. He is a good and moral person, to be sure, but he has no compassion! He has no love! He doesn't even care that his brother who was presumed dead has come back to life; that his brother who was lost has now been found.

Now, how many of you still identify or want to identify with the elder brother? You don't have to put up your hands. *The problem is that he is a part of all of us.* He is a part of each and every one of us! This part of us, whether we think of it as the Pharisee that grumbles because Jesus associates with women, lepers, tax collectors, and sinners; or whether we think of it as the part of us that would tear down LGBTQ flags from the front of our church; or the part of us that has hardened our heart against migrants and refugees who are seeking refuge, who are seeking life in our country; or the part of us that is not moved to share the smallest amount of what we have for those who are food insecure in our own community; this part of us needs healing just as much as the errant son!

To be sure, the younger son, who has made a mess of his life needs to find his way back home; he needs to find his way back to the true center. In the parable, this arrogant little snit has learned a deep lesson about humility.

However, the elder son also needs to find his way back home, to his true home, to his true center, to the life to which he and all of us are called by God.

The elder son needs to learn how to love.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.