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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
March 10, 2013
Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Your embrace, O God, is our life and our hope. Receive us when we drift off into recklessness and despair. Receive us when we drift off into self-righteousness and resentment. We thank you for grace that embraces us, and everyone, with your love. Amen.

“The Prodigal Son”

Barbara Brown Taylor says “the beauty of a really good parable . . . is that it meets generations of listeners wherever they are: in 1st century Palestine, in 4th century Rome, in 16th century Geneva,” or in 21st century St. Louis. “Everyone has a weird family. (Anyone here not have a weird family? Anyone?) Everyone has at least thought about running away from home. And whether or not you happen to have one yourself, almost everyone knows what a pain a sibling can be.”

Siblings who can be a pain, present company excluded of course, is a subject I know something about, given that I have 4 of them. But this past week, I’ve become an expert in the topic because there’s nothing like an aging parent with 5 strong-headed children to test one’s will. If a PhD. was awarded for the subject, I surely would have received that degree this past week, with honors.

And while I’ve preached on this story enough times to know that you don’t want to find yourself in the role of the older brother, that is the person I can entirely relate to because I know exactly where he’s coming from.

So let’s get on with it, shall we?

This father is a single father, as far as we can tell and he loves his boys more than life itself and is willing to do anything, absolutely anything, for them. One day the younger son decides to leave his dad’s house and strike out on his own. So with his hand out, a common position with which most parents are familiar, he asks his Dad for his share of the inheritance.

Men in Jesus' day did not give their sons their inheritance before they died. To do so would have been suicide, because people made their living off their land. They were farmers. And farmers didn't give ½ their property to their spoiled sons before they died. Jesus' listeners would have been shocked to hear that the father did such a thing. And not only that he did it, but did it willingly. Furthermore, his actions constituted more than selling half his assets. Land was considered to be a gift from God to a family, so to sell it would have been in direct violation of the father's religious beliefs. So, this behavior on the part of the father would have been shocking. And we haven't even gotten to the part where the father welcomes the son home with open arms and a party.

So, off the son goes for a life of loose living and debauchery in the Bible's equivalent of Las Vegas.

But of course, anyone who's been to Vegas knows that money doesn't last long or go very far, especially when you're playing the slots. For a while, the younger son works at a pig farm, which is about the most demeaning job a Jewish man could possibly have. But that doesn't last long, because it dawns on him that even his old man's servants are better off than he is. So he concocts an elaborate apology in order to get back into the old man's good graces. So off he goes to meet dear old Dad.

This is when the older brothers, symbolically speaking, hope to see some finger-wagging and head shaking and get a little "tsk, tsk" action out of Dad. After all, we have stood by dutifully, helping out at home and doing our fair share while our good-for-nothing younger brother is hiring prostitutes.

But our father doesn't do any of that. In fact, he goes the opposite route. When he sees his bum son coming home, he goes running after him. That alone would have gotten him laughed at at work the next day. "Great men never run in public," Aristotle said. Great men didn't run in Jesus' day. It would have been a girlish thing to do. And they certainly didn't go running after their bum sons. But this one did. And before the son could get his measly, made up act of contrition out of his mouth, the father put his arms around him and kissed him. He ran like a girl and threw his arms around him and kissed him! If the neighbors saw it they would have been completely taken aback.

This is when the son blurts out his self-serving confession: father, I've sinned against heaven and before you," he says. Well, you could say that again. Perhaps now, we older siblings think, we'll get out finger-wagging and head shaking action.

But, no. He only got out the first part of his self-serving confession, if you can even call it a confession. He never got a chance to tell him he wasn't worthy to be his son, because dear Dad interrupted him and told his servant, quick, go get the finest robe to put on my son. Which, by the way, would have been his robe. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet (only servants go barefoot). And get the fatted calf and kill it (really, a lamb or chicken would have been sufficient, don't you think?). Let's celebrate and have a party! And they began to celebrate.

Now, by this point in the story, the Pharisees who were listening to Jesus tell this story would have been grumbling louder than ever. Such patriarchal nonsense was unheard of. Selling the inheritance was bad enough, but throwing a party was just ridiculous.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. No, Jesus goes on. When the older son approached the house and heard the party, he asked one of the servants, "What the heck is going on here?" Didn't you know, the servant asks? Your brother came home safe and sound so your Dad has thrown him a party!

Well, that is just too much-too much for the older, faithful, hard working, obedient, play by the rules son to fathom. So he became angry and refused to go into the party.

Now, we're going to pause right here before we get to the rest of the story because where we place ourselves in this story is important. I've already told you where I place myself. Perhaps some of you see yourselves as the father, while some of you see yourself as the younger son.

But most of us are the older son. Now, before you take offense at that-after all, if you know this story, you know you don't want to be the older son-before you take offense, hear me out. Sure, we may have had our prodigal moments back in our early 20s, but we came to our senses. Some of us may even be the parent of a prodigal child who has bailed said child out more than once.

But all in all, day by day, week by week, month by month, we're the older son. We older siblings in the symbolic sense are the ones who tend to keep our noses clean and to the proverbial grindstone. We get up and go to work on time. We keep the house in order even when nobody seems to notice. We maintain stable relationships. We hold down jobs we don't always like. We make regular deposits in our savings accounts. We drive sensible cars. We never rack up monstrous credit card bills and we pay our taxes on time. Many of us are tireless parents, and before we're quite rested from that we help mom and dad in their golden years.¹

The Pharisees and scribes who heard this story were the proverbial older brothers. And you know what? They aren't villains we depict them to be. They were devout, hard-working, upstanding folks. They were the backbone of society. They went to school, got a job, had children of their own, joined the PTA and helped with boy scouts and girl scouts. They took food to their neighbor when their neighbor was sick and they took Dad and Mom to the doctor when they no longer could drive. They helped with the grandkids when the parents needed help. They didn't take advantage of their parents like their kid brothers and sisters were prone to do. Does this sound like a familiar life to any of you?

So when they heard Jesus tell this little parable, they grumbled. They didn't like it, because it wasn't fair. And you know what? Who can blame them? Because you know? The older brother was right. Issues of accounting, reckoning and fair treatment matter. If I'm an upstanding citizen and my younger brother or sister or neighbor (for that matter) isn't, it matters. If I pay my taxes and they don't, it matters-and there are consequences for that. Issues of equity and fair treatment matter. Counting, accounting, equity, and issues of fair treatment matter. Really matter. So, I don't think it's fair to dismiss the older son as callous or jealous, because on so many levels he is right.

But the father is working on a much higher level where counting is no longer relevant. The father (who, I'm guessing you all know represents God in this story), knows that we cannot keep score in our relationship with each other and still say we love God with all our heart. And so, this story is about giving up the idea that we can love God and despise each other. We simply cannot, no matter how wrong any of us has been. The only way to work out

our relationship with God is to work out our relationship with each other. That's a tall order for us older siblings who believe in fairness.

But in this story, God is not fair. God is merciful. And that's a hard message for us. It's a hard message to hear that God love us just because. God loves us just because God loves us, not because of what we've done or not done. But just because. In the church, we have a name for this type of love. It's called grace, and it's amazing. But, as I have said before, it's also the hardest concept for good, faithful, hard working, church going people to grasp because it doesn't make any sense. We say we get it. We say we like it. But when I remind people that there is absolutely, positively, nothing one needs to do to earn God's grace, there is always at least one person who takes offense. Because honestly, free grace rewards the worst behavior.

I think this is why we want to put limits on it: there must be something one needs to do to earn God's grace. Or, we must want it. Or, we must seek it. Or we need to seek forgiveness or say we believe or whatever. We want to put limits on how far God's grace will extend. But the minute we do that it's no longer grace. And that is the hardest thing for good, church going, faithful people to hear. Because we're faithful and we're good and it just doesn't seem fair that God would be as merciful to the sinner as God is to the saint.

This morning we sang the hymn "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy". It's based on a poem by Frederick Faber. Verse It's only 2 verses long, but what is telling are the poem's stanzas the hymnal leaves out. Those verses read:

*But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.*

*Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the savior who would have us
Come and gather at His feet?*

This is the vision that lies behind the parable of the prodigal son. It is the strange gospel truth that we are loved, not because we deserve it (thank God)

but because love is who God is. It's not fair; it's better than fair. "Son, daughter, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

Inside the house the party is raging—loud music and crazy dancing. He's throwing the party whether we older brothers think it's time or not. Beyond the door we can see that the table is piled high with the savory food of God's bountiful mercy and the sweet wine of divine grace. And everybody is invited to come on in right now, nothing required, nothing to prove. All who would come in are invited to the banquet:

- the wanderers and the faithful,
- the scoundrels and the saints,
- the reckless and the cautious.

And at the head of the table our host is piling the plates high, dishing up the love we need rather than the love we deserve. Through the open door he catches our eye, holds out a plate piled high, and smiles in invitation.ⁱⁱ

Will you join the party?

Amen.

ⁱ Michael L. Lindvall, "The Problem With Big Brothers"

ⁱⁱ Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem, Session 4, www.thoughtfulchristian.com