

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
March 6, 2016
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At both of our Bible Study classes last week, I asked the members to think about which character they most closely associated with in the familiar parable [of the prodigal son] from Luke. Between the younger son, the older son, and the father, in almost every instance, the participants said they were more like the older son. One person identified with the father, even though she was a woman, and one person identified with the younger son.

I wondered if the Bible Study classes contained a predominance of older sons because they felt a responsibility to know the Bible if they intended to be good Christian men and women. Older daughters and sons, after all, are dutiful and responsible, sometimes to a fault.

A couple of the attendees wished they could become more like the father.

Which of the three do you most identify with and which one do you wish you were more like?

I suspect most of you would also identify with the older son. Many come to church out of a sense of duty. Older sons are responsible and always try to do the right thing just because it is the right thing to do. Older sons never have to be told twice to do their homework, brush their teeth or turn off the TV.

For those of us who do identify with the older son, this parable can present a challenge. We don't think the younger son deserves to be so readily welcomed back into the family fold after he had insulted his father by demanding his inheritance before his father had even died. He seemed to have little respect for his dad, his country, his upbringing or his religious heritage. He messed up on multiple levels and totally failed at life.

Furthermore, we may also not have a lot of admiration for the father in this parable. After all, isn't he irresponsibly generous to the greedy and impertinent young man, whom he probably knows will blow his inheritance on wine, women, fast cars, the horses and endless partying?

On the other hand, the older son has every right to be ticked off at his brother and his father. They have both acted shamefully, in his estimation. He has spent his entire life working slavishly on the farm to turn a handsome profit so his family could live comfortably. What has he gotten in return? In his eyes, absolutely nothing. If he were smart, he'd take the portion of the inheritance left to him and get as far away as possible from his lunatic dad and deadbeat brother.

We can feel his anger and disgust, can't we? Our own families may have some of the same characters in them, not to speak of our country. The whole problem with America today is that too many people are working their tails off and not getting ahead, while freeloaders are getting handouts for doing nothing all day.

Whose side is Jesus on anyway, the working man or the ne'er-do-well?

The answer is both. Jesus is on the side of the over responsible older son and the profligate younger son. Neither, however, is behaving in a manner that makes Jesus' heart glad.

The younger son has at least made a start at a reformed life. It took the father giving him a lot of rope, but in the end, he did hang himself with it. He fell so far from grace that his only option was to humbly crawl back to the only place where he might just find a sliver of acceptance.

I'm sure, in all his wildest dreams, he never could have imagined the reception he would receive. Someone said in Bible study that he wished he could be as forgiving as the father was when the young son turned up the lane toward the house. I responded that I didn't think the father forgave the son when he saw him or when the son confessed that he had completely blown it. For the father to respond as he did by first running, and then embracing and kissing his son, the father had to have forgiven him long before he ever came to himself and did an about face.

There is some question whether the father ever had to forgive him in the first place. My sense is that the father never stopped loving him and longing for his return. We are offended by the younger son's disobedience, but there is no evidence in the parable that the father is ever put off by his son's bad behavior. Maybe he knew that the son's going away was the only possibility that he might return a different person. God lets us sin and fail in our self-will in the hope that we will eventually come around.

Our return to the good graces of our God is not so that God might be able to love us again or for the first time, but rather because that love never stopped and never will. God's love has never stopped and never will no matter what we do. We are inconsistent, but our God is constant. That is what differentiates human love from divine love.

The parable doesn't say whether the younger son has learned his lesson. Only time will tell. But every expectation is that he will now stay put and help his father live out his final years with deep respect and gratitude for him.

This may come as a surprise to you, but I was the one in our Bible study classes who identified with the younger son. In my late teens and early twenties, I was somewhat rebellious and even took a trip one summer to a distant land to seek an alternative to what I thought was my

parents very misguided and regimented middle/upper class lifestyle. At the end of a long journey, I found my life was totally bankrupt, and I had little choice but to accept God's open-ended invitation to join the party of love and joy.

This parable leaves the older son's future in limbo as well. Up until now, he has stayed home, but never realized and received the fullness of his father's love. He has thought he had to earn love through hard work, but that was, in fact, never the case.

There is no indication from the parable that he is remotely ready to forgive his brother or his father and join the celebration. Maybe, as I said earlier, he will now leave home full of disdain, disgust and anger until he, too, eventually finds it intolerable and he himself hits the skids. At that point maybe he too will figure out that love and joy are the Father's free gifts to all of us, and only our heavenly Father can supply them endlessly. AMEN.