

The Elder Son  
Year C, 4 Lent (Rose Sunday)  
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Luke 15:11-32

The Gospel we just heard is popularly known as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” and indeed, he *is* the main character. But listen to Jesus’ own introduction: “There was a man who had *two sons*.” Some scholars, therefore, have suggested that it is better entitled the “Parable of the Two Sons.” Others think it should be called the “Parable of the Loving Father.” That’s the thing about parables: they may be viewed from multiple angles. One can focus on the prodigal, or the sons in relationship to each other, or the father in relationship to both sons, or, as I shall do this morning, on the relationship of the father to the *elder* son.

I never paid any real attention to the elder son until I took a course at Yale called “The Performance of Biblical Texts.” At the end of the semester, we put on a public performance. Each student gave a solo performance, and then the class offered two ensemble pieces, with each of us taking turns reciting one or two verses. This parable was one of those ensemble pieces, and I was assigned the role of the elder son, which, I have to admit, disappointed me at the time. After all, he only has one line: (*read blandly*) “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back—who has devoured your property with prostitutes—you killed the fatted calf for him!”

But to my surprise, in the weeks leading up to the performance, I developed a great sense of empathy for the elder son. And as I got under the skin of this character, a sense of righteous indignation grew in me. How dare that prodigal son be such a good-for-nothing, immoral, conceited, spoiled, entitled *jerk*? And how *could* my father forgive him? By the time the performance rolled around, I was seething with rage:

“Listen! For all these years I have been working like a *slave* for you, and I have never disobeyed your command. Yet you have never given me even a young *goat* so that I might celebrate with *my* friends. But when this...*son*...of yours came back—who has devoured your property with prostitutes—you killed the fatted calf for *him!*”

From the elder son’s perspective, this is not a joyful story. This is a bitter story, full of indignation, resentment, repressed envy, feelings of rejection, abandonment, and pain. Doesn’t my father love me? Don’t I deserve to be rewarded for my good deeds? Why can’t I get your attention? Why am I always ignored, taken for granted, underappreciated? From the elder son’s perspective, this is a story of despair. The elder son is estranged from his father without ever leaving home, without ever failing in his filial duty. The elder son isn’t feeling the love.

Most commentaries, however, don’t care about the elder son. They almost always ignore his feelings, or are dismissive of them. Everyone loves a story of redemption, and in these stories, characters like the elder son are simply immature, sulking narcissists who don’t get the point that it’s not about them. The elder son is to be pitied, but not loved.

One commentary that stands out over against this trend is found in Yale theologian Miroslav Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. According to Volf, the father’s “behavior was governed by the one fundamental ‘rule’: relationship has priority

over all rules. Before any rule can apply, he *is* a father to his sons and his sons *are* brothers to one another.”

In other words, the father’s relationship to his sons and his sons’ relationships to each other and to the father are not dependent upon behaviour. The relationships might be wounded and in need of repair, but the *fact* of relationship is a given that cannot be taken away. This is why conflict in families is so *painful*, why conflict in the *church* is so painful: all conflict is an attempt to deny and oppose an unbreakable reality, the reality of our interdependence. We can act *as if* another person or group is dead to us, or that they don’t exist, or shouldn’t exist; we can try to annihilate all connection between “me” and “you,” between “us” and “them,” but that bond persists despite any act of will on our part. It doesn’t even matter if both parties in a relationship wish to sever that bond for all time; it still persists within and between and among us—it reaches out and takes hold of our hearts across space and time, even beyond the grave. This is why those who have buried parents or siblings with whom they have not reconciled are *haunted* by the unresolved issues that existed when their parents or siblings were still alive. This is why those of us who have been divorced, or are children of divorce, still ache with sadness long after the damage has been done. And if we *aren’t* haunted by ghosts of the past, it is only because we have managed to succeed (even if only temporarily) in doing one of two things: *hardening* our hearts toward those who have hurt us (and perhaps also toward those whom *we* have hurt), or *softening* our hearts.

This is the lesson of the father and the elder son: the father is soft-hearted, wise, and strong. The elder son is hard-hearted, intelligent, and fierce. Note that they are *not* opposites at all, but that in this one essential area, their orientation to the world profoundly affects *who* they are and *how* they behave. So, too, our orientation to the world profoundly affects who *we* are and how *we* behave towards each other. This is precisely what the parable illustrates.

Note that in refusing to enter the feast, what makes the elder son’s position so unbearably fierce is that his judgment of his brother’s immorality is *true*. The elder brother is *right*, one hundred percent right: the prodigal *has* sinned, the younger son *has* spent his inheritance in dissolute living. But the elder son’s righteous indignation leads only to a deadening hard-heartedness, an alienation not only from his brother, whom he calls “this son of *yours*,” but also his father, whom he cannot bear to address as father. The elder son looks at things in black and white: something is either *bad* or *good*.

The father, on the other hand, recognizes the validity of the elder brother’s “good/bad” distinctions, but the father looks at the world through an entirely different lens. He has an entirely different set of values that divides the world not between the *good* and the *bad* but between the *lost* and the *found*.

Note, too, that while the prodigal’s departure is indeed “bad,” the mere fact of his return does not thereby make the prodigal any more objectively “good” than he was at the beginning of the story. In other words, the prodigal son may be just as much of a jerk when he returns as when he left, but at least there’s hope for reconciliation and redemption after he returns. This is because his father cares more that he has been “found,” than whether the prodigal has learned any moral lessons from his departure. The prodigal may not yet be a “good” man. But for the father, the prodigal’s return makes possible reconciliation-within-relationship, which is itself the greater good.

For regardless of the content of the prodigal’s character, in order for the father to see him not as bad or good but as lost or found, he must keep the lost son alive to him in his heart, even when the prodigal is in “a far country.” And when the *elder* son’s anger threatens to shatter that relationship,

the father responds with a consistent soft-heartedness that refuses to believe it possible *not* to have a relationship with his elder son, even when the elder son appears to be on the verge of ending any possibility of relationship.

As Miroslav Volf puts it, the father hopes "...that through his suffering he may regain both as his sons (if the other brother was persuaded) and help them rediscover each other as brothers...He allows himself to be taken on the journey of their shifting identities so that he can continue to be their father and they, each other's brothers. Why does he not lose himself on the journey? Because he is guided by indestructible love and supported by a flexible order."

While I find myself in sympathy with Volf's take on this great parable, I am still vexed by three basic questions that the parable itself does not answer, perhaps intentionally. They are all "what if" questions.

The first is that while I agree that, as Volf puts it, "one must celebrate with those who want to return," what about those who don't *want* to return, or who *won't* return? What about those who break the rules but refuse to accept the consequences? What if they *never* confess or repent, even after returning? Isn't that just perpetuating a cycle of abuse and dysfunction? How are we to treat "them," *then*?

The second is that while the father hopes through his suffering to "regain both as his sons (if the other brother was persuaded) and help them rediscover each other as brothers," what if the elder brother *isn't* persuaded to enter the feast? The parable ends on a note of pleading, with the father making a defense of his actions to the elder son, but Jesus, the master storyteller, leaves us with a cliffhanger. What happens next? Is the elder brother forever standing outside the feast, holding on to his indignation and resentment? Is he always angry at the father for not enforcing the rules, for not demonstrating how much the father loves the elder son?

The third "what if" is about *us*: What if we're *not able* to muster the same sort of "indestructible love" necessary to hold both the prodigals and the elder sons of this world in our hearts with the same compassionate soft-heartedness as the father? Is this even *possible* for humans, or is this something only *God* can do?

Despite these "what ifs," however, I absolutely believe in the compassionate God that this parable points toward, and I *hope* that God can soften the hearts of stone of all of us "elder brothers" out there. For in the end, most of us who identify with the elder brother are not hard-hearted out of evil intent, but because too often we cannot stand to be wounded as Christ was wounded; we are unwilling to give up being right in order to be in relationship, and thereby miss out on our role in drawing all of humanity into Christ's saving embrace. We do not want to take up that Cross and follow Jesus.

But, perhaps, on this Rose Sunday, perhaps we can *rest* a moment in the blessed assurance that though Jesus, we *do have a Father* who will stand outside the door of the feast, *for as long as it takes*, waiting for us to come in.