

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

March 6, 2016

Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found. (Luke 15:32 N.R.S.V.)

Come to the Party

What is it with parents and their youngest children? If you are an older child, you will know what I mean when I say that the youngest child can get away with murder.

My parents had six children. I was somewhere in the middle as was my sister, Ivy. Ivy and I were talking the other day about how our youngest sister, Rezena, had our father wrapped around her little finger. She would say, "Daddy, can I have a candy bar?"

"Oh, I don't know," he would say.

"Please, Daddy!" And he would give in.

That never worked for us older children. At least that is the way it felt to us.

Even God seems to have a soft spot for the youngest. What is it with God and the younger children? Remember the story of Jacob and Easu? They were twin boys. Easu was the oldest. He was a strong, rugged, hunter type. Jacob was the younger one. He was fair of skin, more fragile, a stay at home-mommy's boy. He was also a scheming rascal.

Jacob stole his brother's birthright and then had to flee for fear that his brother would kill him. Later after many years and hardships, Jacob comes back home. After that night of wrestling with God by the Jabbok ford, Jacob meets his brother Easu and is forgiven. Easu becomes the forefather of a nation in his own right. However, it is Jacob the youngest, who becomes the forefather of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people.

Then there was Joseph. What is it with God and the younger children? Joseph had 10 older half brothers. They were all jealous of Joseph because he was their father's favorite. Their dad even gave Joseph a special long sleeved coat of many colors. Then too, Joseph was a bit of a punk. He bragged to his brothers about a dream that he had where they all bowed down to him.

The older brothers had enough of him one day so they grabbed him, and sold him into Egyptian slavery. Joseph had a very difficult time over the next several years. Then God raises him to a position of some power in Egypt. In the end, Joseph becomes the hero of the story with God using him to save his people from starvation.

David, you remember him. What is it with God and the younger children? He was the youngest son of Jesse. David had seven older brothers, but God chose him to be king over Israel. It was David and not his older brothers who with God's help killed the giant, Goliath. It was David, and not his older brothers, who becomes the king that ushers in the Golden Age of Israel.

So now we come to this story that Jesus told, the story of the prodigal son. The father in this story is obviously God. What is it with God and the younger children? The younger son in this story is portrayed in a way that sets our responsible teeth on edge.

The generous people of town said he was full of life. Most referred to him as "that 'hold my beer and watch this!' kid." The generous people of the town said he was born a rebel. Most just said, "Nothing good is ever going to come from that punk." The generous and the not-so-generous did agree on this. They all felt sorry for the boy's dad.

It so happened one day while the boy's dad was trying to urge him to be more responsible, things got really ugly. The boy said, "Dad you are cramping my style. I wish you would just hurry up and die. I can't wait to get my part of the inheritance so I can get out of this one horse town."

The father was deeply hurt, but he said to his son, "If that is what you really want, then so be it. I'll get you the money and you can leave." The young hoodlum didn't even have the grace to be embarrassed. He just grabbed the money and without even a "thank you," he was out the door and gone.

The boy went to a far country and there he threw the money away on passing pleasures. When his money ran out, his friends ran out as well. Things kept getting worse and worse until the young man finally took a job feed pigs. I remind you that the Jews considered pigs to be unclean animals. No self-respecting Jewish boy would ever stoop to feeding pigs.

Yet that was what this broke and desperate kid had to do. Even then, he was so hungry that he found himself thinking that maybe he'd just join the pigs at the trough. Even the pig slop was looking good.

It was at that moment the boy realized that he had really hit bottom. He said to himself, "When you hit the bottom, it is time to stop digging." He realized that even the poorest of his father's slaves had food to eat and clothes to wear. So he decided that he would go home and beg his father's forgiveness and ask to be taken back as a slave.

The young man realized that he had hurt his father greatly. He expected that his father would refuse to see him, “You made your bed, now lie in it!”

So the young man rehearsed his speech as he journeyed back home. He had the apology all ready. Much to his surprise and relief, his father threw all dignity to the wind. He came running to meet his long lost son. He waved away the boy’s offer to be a slave and restored him to the family at once. Then he insisted on throwing him a great big, “Welcome Home Party.”

Now, most sermons on this passage focus on this scene of forgiveness and restoration. It is wonderful good news to know that no matter how far away from God we have run, no matter what we might have done in the past, God will welcome us home again.

Today, however, I want to push this story a bit further. I don’t know about you, but I have always identified more with the older son. I have always been the good student, a hard worker, the responsible type. I never ran away from home. And I can’t remember a time when I did not know God’s love.

At the end of his story, Jesus talks about the older brother. When the older brother comes back in after working all day in the fields, he finds there is a party going on. And when he discovers that his worthless brother has come back home and their father is throwing a party for him. He is angry.

When the father finds out, his older son is outside sulking. The father comes out of the house to talk to him. The older boy says, “I can’t believe you are throwing that worthless punk a party. I have been slaving for you all these years. You never threw me a party.”

The father says, “Yes, son, you have done very well and I am proud of you. I would remind you though that you haven’t been quite slaving for me. Everything you have worked for here, will be yours when I die. That hasn’t changed. In the meantime, you have never had to sleep on the cold hard ground, never had to sell your soul to feed your body, never had to wonder if I still love you.”

He says, “Come on, son, your brother was lost and now he is found, we have to celebrate. Please won’t you come in and join in the party?”

Jesus’ story ends there and we are left hanging. We don’t know if the younger son stayed reformed after that or if he fell back into his old destructive ways.

We also don’t know if the older brother went in and joined the party or if he stayed outside and sulked. We don’t know if the older brother tried to help his younger brother in the days ahead or if he tried to sabotage everything his brother did.

We don’t know because this is our story and we are writing the ending with our own lives.

What is it with God and the younger children? In a sense we are all the younger children. Younger children often feel intimidated by their older siblings. Their older brothers and sisters are bigger, stronger, and know so much more. Plus, older brothers and sisters often tell the younger ones that they are too small, too weak, too much of a pest and that they should just go away.

There will always be people who are bigger, stronger, smarter, and more talented than us. It is good news to know that God's favor rests on us little ones.

What is it with God and the younger children? Like the younger son in this story we have all rebelled against God and tried to do things our way instead of God's way. For us that is good news. Even when we insist that we can do it for ourselves and in so doing fall flat on our faces in the mud, it is good to know that God cares for us little ones. God will always come running to help us get back up, to give us a warm hug, and words of encouragement.

Does God actually love the younger children more? No, that is just a matter of perspective. We are always afraid that our parents or God will love someone more than us. Notice in the story that the father goes outside to talk to his older son. That would be a huge loss of dignity and respect for a middle eastern father. Still, the father in the story goes.

God stoops to give to each of us the love and the encouragement we need.

Sometimes we do feel like the youngest son. Yet, sometimes we feel like the oldest son. For those latter times, there is also good news. Left to our own devices, those of us who identify with the oldest son would soon become so judgmental and critical that we miss God's path completely. That is what happened to the Pharisees and the Sadducees of Jesus time.

Time and again God has to come outside to us proud and pouting folks and remind us: "The party is not for the worthy, the party is for the willing. Are you willing?"

Amen.

