

4th Sunday in Lent
March 18, 2007

Joshua 5:9-12
II Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

St. Paul's, Red Wing
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How many of you are the youngest in your families? How many of you have been accused of being spoiled? You know, Mom and Dad were easier on you, more lenient with you? OK, I'll admit it. My parents were much more relaxed by the time I came along. In fact, I think I was a relief to them after my brother Mark. My older siblings, I contend, more than made up for it. They took a vote once and voted me out of the family. They took a vote and decided my parents had had one too many children.

The rules benefit the oldest. You know that, don't you? The rules benefit the first born, especially if they are boys. The rules benefit the one who behaves. By Old Testament rules, the oldest would get ALL the inheritance, all the authority.

From the start of this story, the father is too generous. He gives half to the younger son, who, more often than not, would not get anything. And the father gives it before he dies. Then there is the father's own behavior. He needs to go to a parenting class and learn tough love, don't you think? He needs to learn to say "No." No money. No inheritance. In

the end what's the deal with running out to meet the scoundrel, the loser? Where is the dignity in that? He's still the head of the household. He's the father. He's in charge. The youngest son practically spat in his face on the way out the door when he took off long ago. The father is just inviting abuse. Make the younger son give the speech. Make him apologize. Make him confess before he is forgiven. Then, set down some rules, for goodness sake. Show him some tough love.

Gee, now I'm starting to sound like the oldest in the family!

We can all understand the older brother. This is not really fair. This is not even smart. Is that any way to run a family? NO.

Or, is it? A fellow pastor recently shared some of the story of his family. A younger sibling had had a lot of troubles, as a teenager and then as an adult. The family gathered and tried to figure out how to handle it. Everyone was asked to do more, more again to help. Their father said with some sadness, "I never promised you I would be fair. I promised you that I would love you."

Here's the deal. We are the older brother. We like to think of ourselves as the youngest. We like to think of ourselves as the poor kid who needs forgiveness and is welcomed home into the father's arms.

But really, most of us are pretty well behaved. Most of us live by the rules. Most of us benefit from the rules, the systems out there. We err from time to time, a speeding ticket or a parking ticket once in a while. A curse word when we break something or hammer a thumb instead of a nail. But really, think about it, we know the rules and mostly follow them. And we are just a little bit resentful of those people who do not get it, who keep getting into trouble. They know better. How come they can't get it together? How come they need the welfare check or the food stamps? Why do they get a diploma while sitting in jail? They ought to pay, not benefit from a crime.

Here we are in church. We are the good kids. We are the ones doing what we are supposed to do. Don't we get more because we are good? Because we are better?

God has this annoying habit of welcoming everyone. God has this annoying, infuriating habit of lifting up those who are at the bottom, of choosing the runt of the litter to be king, of regarding the offering of one over another. God pays the worker who comes at the end of the day and hardly lifts a finger the same as the worker who has slaved away all day,

through the heat of the day. God is generous to the lost who are found last and makes them first. It is so annoying.

It goes back all the way to Cain and Abel. Cain was the oldest, the first born of all first borns, the farmer. Like a good son, he tills the earth and brings his offering. Abel, the youngest is a shepherd, he brings his offering, a nice offering, but brings it second and God has regard for Abel's offering. God just likes sheep better than grain. No reason is given. It's just a matter of taste. Who knows why, but this ticks Cain off so badly that he kills his brother.

We get so mad. It's just not fair. If I behave, shouldn't dad like me best? If I come first, don't I get to be first and stay first?

The parent says, "You are always with me. You stayed. You have had this blessing all along of being with me. Isn't that enough? Isn't that more than the one who wanders away, loses it all, and comes back with nothing? No pride. No possessions. No dignity. You have all of that. Or, as speaks the owner of the parable of the workers in the vineyard....or...do you begrudge me my generosity? Do we resent God's generosity?

Yes!!! Yes, we do! Sometimes we do.

Why do we come here on a Sunday morning? Why do we obey the rules? Is it to win God's favor? Is it to get to heaven? Is it a little insurance policy in case God's love isn't enough? Or is it to get in first, or get in ahead of those people who just cannot get their lives together?

In the deepest recesses of our hearts, I suspect we think God loves us best.

I hate to tell you, it does not work that way. This is, after all, one of the central teachings of the Lutheran expression of Christianity. This was the big bone that Martin Luther had to pick with the church of his day. You cannot earn God's love. Not a single bit of it. You cannot earn God's love by being the oldest or by playing by all the rules. You will never be in a position to deserve more of God's love than the slouching brother who comes crawling back up the drive way hoping to get help AGAIN. God loves us – BECAUSE – God loves us. That's all.

We come, we worship, we serve, we obey only to say "Thanks." Everything we do is gravy. The meat and potatoes are God's love. Everything we do is just an added benefit of being with God, the extra blessing of entering into God's household and participating in God's realm

of mercy and grace. God is not going to love us more or forgive us more. We will not get a better spot in heaven.

The truth of the matter is we are all just one, big dysfunctional family. Some days we may feel like the youngest, embarrassed by our own foibles and slinking back hoping the lightning will not strike us down in our tracks. Really, most days, we stand with the Pharisees. We think we've got an edge, and we are just a teensy bit resentful that Jesus keeps company with the scum of the earth. He associates with the wrong sorts. We are just a little tired of dealing with everyone else's mistakes. Wouldn't the world be a better place if people just thought like we did? And acted like we did?

We call this "The parable of the prodigal son." The word "prodigal" is not in the Bible. It is the name we have given this story. We like to focus on the younger, misbehaving brother and talk about forgiveness. This parable, however, was told to the Pharisees, the ones who belonged, the ones who behaved, the ones who stayed and knew all the rules. This parable urges those of us who are a part of the family and the household of God to open our arms to receive those who come slouching through the door, asking for forgiveness and help. Again. And again. And again.

Why? Why should we open the arms of mercy and forgiveness?
Not because it is fair. Not because of any sense of justice. We do it
because God asks us to. We do it because we have been so loved. It's
part of what it means to be family – the family of God. Amen.