

Lent 4C: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
Church of the Good Shepherd
The. Rev. W. Terry Miller
March 30, 2025

The Good Son

Every family is normal...until you get to know them. That's the sense I've gotten after twenty years of ministry. It doesn't matter how "perfect" a family may look like on the outside; scratch the surface and you'll find sibling rivalries and estrangements, fair-haired children and black sheep, grudges and divorces, addictions and abandonment. Every family I know is beset by one or more of these conflicts. Mine certainly has its fair share of conflicted relationships. And I imagine yours does too. They all do. It's frankly amazing that we are as normal as we are, given the families we come from!

And so it is with a certain degree of gratitude and relief that we come to the story Jesus tells in this morning's Gospel. For, the story he tells is about a family we recognize, a decidedly *imperfect* family—in this case, a family headed by a weak patriarch with an absentee wife and two estranged sons whom the father seems unable to control. We may know this story as the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," but a more fitting name, I think, would be the "Parable of the Dysfunctional Family"! It's a powerful story, a story of reconciliation and reunion, grace and forgiveness. But before that, it is a story of disrespect and bitterness, resentment and falling-out.

Now, when teachers and preachers talk about this story, the focus is, as I said, almost always on the younger brother, the "prodigal son," who wastes his inheritance only to come crawling back when he's penniless, or else on the father who so generously and graciously takes him back. But what we often forget is that the father had *two* sons, not one, that he loved. And the other son, the elder son, deserves our consideration, too. For his behavior has as much to teach us about ourselves and about God, as the behavior of his father and younger brother does.

The older son, to be fair, isn't as prominent in the story as his younger brother is. He's not present when his brother demands his inheritance, or if he is, he keeps silent about it. In which case, he may not have liked it, may not have agreed with his father giving his brother *half the farm*, but it wasn't his place to say so. As a "good son," he deferred to his father's judgement. And when his kid brother sold his share to fund his high-flying lifestyle, and he had to work all that much harder to keep the farm profitable, the elder brother doesn't say a word. Nose to the grindstone, shoulder to the plow. It's not until his good-for-nothing brother returns, and his father throws him a welcome-home party (!), *only then* does he make himself and his thoughts known, conspicuously, by making a stink, making a scene, and making his father look bad.

Now, it's easy to poke fun at the older brother and his pigheadedness, to make a caricature of him. But fact is, we know this guy, or at least someone like him. Indeed, many of us *are* him—the eldest child, the responsible one, the faithful one, the one who does everything a "good son" or "daughter" is supposed to do. Even if we're not actually the oldest in terms of birth order, we can still act like one—striving to live up to your parents' expectations, wanting to be considered obedient and dutiful, playing by the rules, occasionally shaking your heads and maybe grumbling

a little at those who don't share your sense of responsibility. Believe me, I get it. I'm an eldest child too!

And because of that, I also know that, as much as we look down on our wayward younger siblings, there's a part of us that secretly envies them and their carefree ways. We may be proud of our conscientious and dutiful life; we may draw a lot of our identity from it...but sometimes it can feel like a burden. Sometimes we just want to "run-away" like the younger son or at least have a go at the reprehensible and immoral things others do, to see what we're missing. Yet we refrain, as much out of fear, admittedly, as it is out of desire for the good.

You see, Jesus may not tell us much about the older son in this story but he doesn't have to. We understand him, and can understand where he's coming from. He's the "good son," the son that stayed, that did what was expected, while his younger brother was off galivanting across the globe, spending the family wealth on God knows what—whores and hard drink, most likely. Now he says he wants to come home—fine, let the prodigal return...*as a penitent*. Let him return to bread and water, not the fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a new ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing. I mean, what does it say when someone like that, someone who's caused so much grief, who's squandered the family inheritance, is welcomed home as an honored guest, *as a hero*? It's not right. It sends the wrong message, I say.

Whatever merit those claims might have, what incenses the older son is not the damage to his family's honor or any "moral breakdown of society" his father's leniency may facilitate, but rather his own hurt feelings. The elder son makes this plain when he is confronted by his father. "Listen!" he demands, "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 give him the calf we've been fattening!"

It's clear from this outburst that, for all the focus on the younger son being lost, the older son is lost too, even though he never left home. If that's hard to imagine, the elder son being lost, it's because we usually think of lostness in terms of actions that are quite visible, even spectacular, like those of the younger son. He sinned in a way we can easily identify. He misused his money, his time, his friends, and, if we believe his brother, his own body. Everyone saw it, knew it. His misbehavior was very clear-cut.

The lostness of the elder son, however, is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the "right" things. He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding and hard-working. People respected him, admired him, considered him a model son. Outwardly, he was faultless. But when confronted by his father's graciousness to his younger brother, the mask of the "good son" slips and there is revealed a resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person who's been deeply hidden but growing stronger for years.

We can understand how this happens, how resentment, the quiet, frozen anger, sets in, how little irritations, small slights—not being picked for the team, being left out by friends, being passed over for a job or a promotion—how they can infect our hearts and fester, breeding bitterness and jealousy, and how the anger periodically erupts in self-righteous and self-pitying complaint. "I

tried so hard, worked so long, did so much, and still I get no respect, no appreciation. Why do people not thank me, not invite me, not play with me, not honor me, while they pay so much attention to those who take life so easily and so casually? Don't I deserve to be loved?"

Indeed, it's in such complaints, spoken or unspoken, that we recognize the "elder brother" in us—in our grumbling over little rejections, our whining about little impolitenesses, our lamenting over little negligences. It's so pernicious, this complaining, and so damaging to the human heart and to relationships with others. For, no one likes to be around a complainer. They're hard to live with. They suck all the joy out of life.

Just look at the elder son. He literally can't bring himself to join the party. He can't step over his resentment to get to the joy, to the celebration. And so he stands cross-armed in the backyard, relishing his righteousness, so pleased that he got his grievances off his chest, that he reasserted his claim to his father's favor, defended his status as the "good" son, the "deserving" son, even if in doing so it shamed his father and broke his heart.

But the elder son's hardheadedness is only matched by his father's love. His son let loose all the rage that's been bottled up for years, but the father does not meet his harsh words with judgement or try to defend himself or even comment on his son's behavior. He moves passed all that, to remind his son of his intimate relationship with him: "Child, you are always with me," he says. The older son has never left his father's house, and the father has shared everything with him. He has made him a part of his daily life, keeping nothing from him. "All I have is yours." There is no clearer statement of the father's unbounded love for his son.

Here, in the father's affectionate response, we see that the joy of the younger son's return in no way means that the elder son is less loved, less appreciated, less favored. The father does not prize one son over the other. He loves them equally and is willing to sacrifice himself and his dignity for both of them. Indeed, he goes out to elder son, to bring him home, just as he did his younger brother, caring nothing about how it makes him look to his guests. He desires more than anything to have both sit at his table and share in his joy.

It is not clear that the elder son buys his argument. The story ends with the younger son welcomed home and the elder son still standing outside. What the elder son doesn't understand is that to go inside is not to condone his brother's misbehavior or gloss over what he's done. It requires only that he be open, open to joy, open to grace, and so open to discovering what it really means to be good, as demonstrated by the truly "good" Son, Jesus Christ.

For, Jesus *is* the model son, just as his relationship with the Father is the ideal relationship between father and son. Just as the father in this story asserts that "You are always with me. All that I have is yours," there is no separation between God and Jesus: "I and the Father are one." There's no division of work between them: "The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything to him." No envy: "The Son can do nothing by himself, he can only do what he sees the Father doing." And no competition: "I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father." There is perfect unity between this Father and Son. And whereas the sons in this story completely misunderstood their father, Jesus is sent by his Father to reveal God's unwavering love for all his wayward and resentful children, and to offer himself as the way

home. Resentments and complaints, deep as they may seem, vanish in the face of him. Joy is possible again in him, through the letting go of sins.

For the elder sons and daughters among us, and those who love them, this is good news. We don't have to stand outside in the dark, feeling justified but left out. There's a party going on inside. We can hear the music and the dancing even from where we are, and there is plenty left to eat. The choice is up to us, just as it was left up to the elder son. Accepting the invitation, we know, means laying down our resentments and our grievances. But then again, it's hard to feast when your fists are clenched, and mighty difficult to dance when you're carrying a grudge. Are you ready to come in, ready to join the party? God is waiting for us, waiting with us as long as we need. Amen.