

THE OLDER BROTHER

LUKE 15:11-32

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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We've arrived at the last Sunday of our "Faith Questions" sermon series.

This is also my last sermon before heading out on a sabbatical. I want to repeat here what I have said in numerous contexts leading up to this day: I am very grateful to the church for this gift of time to rest and be renewed.

As you've heard, our final faith question is based on one of Jesus most well known parables. The question is:

What about the older brother in the story of the prodigal son?

It's quite a story. Of all the stories that Jesus tells, there are few that lay our souls bare like the parable of the prodigal son.

It is a story for broken sons and weary daughters, for lovesick fathers and grumbling brothers. It is a story that describes the homecoming we all hunger for, even when we are only dimly aware of it.

It is the story of what God looks like and how God loves, no matter what we look like, no matter how poorly we love.

It is a story that I assumed I must have preached on before given how much time I spend thinking and writing about it, so I went to see what I had said in the past. I typed the

text into the search engine of my sermon archives and was surprised to discover... nothing.

Nothing?

Not *one* sermon in nearly seven years on this incredible story? I began to feel like I had completely failed you. I promptly wrote a blog post about it to atone for my sins.

On Thursday morning, I was still struggling to believe that I had never preached on this passage before, so I entered the text again. Turns out I had entered the wrong passage last time! I *had* preached on this sermon before. But only once.

Anyone want to take a guess which Sunday?

It was my first Sunday here at LMC, August 7, 2011. So it feels appropriate to come back to it again as I head out on sabbatical.

I'm not going to tell the story again because you've already heard it. And most of us know it pretty well anyway. Many of us have heard plenty of sermons or read books about it. There is no shortage of words about this story!

So, to begin I want us to try to enter into the story not so much through words as through images.

I want to put up three images. And in each image, I want you to pay specific attention to the older son.

This may require some discipline. I think that we instinctively identify with the younger son, particularly if we've wandered from the path or made a mess of our lives or know the experience of coming home after a long time away.

Or perhaps we instinctively identify with the father. We've been waiting for a lost prodigal to return. Our hearts are heavy with hope and anticipation.

But I want us to try to zero in on the older son. What do you see in how he is portrayed?

Rembrandt, 1669 (one of his final works)

- In this image, the older son is **detached** and **aloof**.
- We can imagine him surveying the scene with... contempt? Bemusement? Severity? Pity?
- His hands are folded and kept close to himself as opposed to his father's which are spread out in comfort and welcome
- The older son is upright, proper, respectable in contrast to his debauched younger brother who is bedraggled and humiliated and bowed down low
- Perhaps we could say, he's "monitoring the situation."

Michel Martin Drolling – French painter from the 1800s

- In this image, the older son is **outraged!**
- He's almost shaking his fists, incredulous at the injustice of it all.
- How can the father overlook such flagrant disregard for the family? Is he not ashamed?
- What's the point of being good and following the rules if this miserable "son of yours" can come crawling back in desperation and you take him back (he says he's repentant, but he's probably just hungry!)?

Andrey Mironov - Parable of the Two Sons (2012)

- In this image, the older son wants nothing to do with his father or his brother
- This image speaks to me of **resignation** and **superiority**
- "Don't talk to me about mercy, I don't want to hear it"
- It's a fascinating image—the father's hand seems simultaneously to be extended in a plea for his older son to change his mind and in blessing of his younger son
- It is, for me, the saddest of the three paintings; the older son won't even look at the father or his brother
- He can't tolerate either of them—his brother for being such a scoundrel and his father for taking him back
- *This isn't how things are supposed to work, and he won't have any of it!*

So with these "older brother" images in our minds, I want us to return to the story and consider the context in which Jesus told it. Who was this story told *to*? And why?

Jesus stories are never just timeless fables that float above history and culture and relationships, although they obviously do transcend time and space.

First and foremost, they are always told at a particular time in a particular place and for a particular reason.

For the immediate context of this parable, we go back to the beginning of chapter 15:

Now the **tax collectors and sinners** were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the **Pharisees and the teachers of the law** muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Then Jesus told them this parable...

He goes on to tell them three parables—one about finding a lost sheep, another about a woman finding a lost coin, and then a parable about a father and his lost son.

Jesus is speaking *to* the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling. He’s also speaking, presumably, within earshot of the “tax collectors and sinners” who had come near to listen.

These two groups of people are symbolized by the two brothers in this story.

The tax collectors and sinners are the younger son, those who have wandered from God, those who have made a mess of things, those who have blown the inheritance and have nothing to show for it.

The Pharisees and scribes are the older brother. The ones who have stayed home, followed the rules, kept the house neat and tidy, done what their father asked.

Both groups are there. But Jesus is speaking *primarily* to the Pharisees and religious leaders (Luke 15:1-2). It is their “grumbling” about Jesus eating with and welcoming “unworthy” people that leads to these three parables.

The Pharisees and scribes would at various points have checked off pretty much every box from the composite picture of the older brother we just sketched: aloof, detached, outraged, severe, superior, self-righteous.

This parable in particular is Jesus' direct response to the Pharisees complaint that he was associating with the wrong sorts of people, that the wrong sorts of people were being welcomed in on what God was doing.

Jesus is talking to older brothers.

And even though we identify with the younger brother and the father pretty easily, I suspect that there's a lot more older brother in most of us than we might care to admit.

Especially those of us who have been doing this "Christian" thing for a while.

Perhaps, rather than finding our way home, we have never left home, and find ourselves grumbling at God's generosity from time to time.

Perhaps we resent those who are welcomed into the family after a lifetime of destructive and hurtful choices.

Perhaps we just think we are owed more than we have been receiving.

According to Tim Keller in his fantastic little book *The Prodigal God*, the older brother is just as lost as the younger brother.

Indeed, his lostness is of a more dangerous sort, because it is predicated on his own rectitude. He believes that righteousness must be rewarded (particularly his own) and that sin must be punished. His categories are fixed and unyielding. He is a rule keeper all the way, and he has little use for those who don't keep the rules.

Keller says that older brothers are a far bigger problem in the church than younger brothers. Why, he asks, do churches tend to repel younger brothers and attract older brothers when Jesus had the exact opposite effect?

A sobering question, that one.

Older brothers tend to be angry a lot and have a strong sense of their superiority over others. They are driven by a slavish sense of duty and turn faith into a system of joyless fear-based compliance.

They can be really, really self-righteous. They resent those who haven't earned the Father's love and mercy (as they, presumably, have). They can't tolerate those who enjoy all the benefits of home despite not being nearly as diligent or smart or holy or morally upright as they are.

Older brothers are everywhere. You may have noticed this.

Older brothers on the right tend to be full of evangelical zeal, doctrinal precision, and personal piety. They are faithful to the church. They like preachers who "just preach the bible." They tend to be quite conservative politically and theologically, and look down on those who have the wrong views about abortion and same sex marriage and pipelines and race and who knows what else. They tend to define their purity in opposition to those "other Christians" who are so obviously wrong and have completely misunderstood who Jesus was and what he wanted.

Older brothers on the left tend to be activist warriors, full of evangelical zeal, doctrinal precision and personal piety (if of a different sort). They like preachers who summon them to justice and solidarity and political advocacy. They tend to be quite liberal politically and theologically, and look down on those who have the wrong views about abortion and same sex marriage and pipelines and race and who knows what else. They tend to define their purity in opposition to those "other Christians" who are so obviously wrong and have completely misunderstood who Jesus was and what he wanted.

And then there are those older brothers look at both conservative bible warriors and liberal activists with a sneer of condescension and thank God that they are like neither of these miserable sinners.

These older brothers exist peerlessly and comfortably above the fray, refusing to follow along with either herd. They congratulate themselves on their ability to identify the shortcomings and biases and idolatries of all those *other* older brothers.

They are confident that they, alone, have consistently been about their father's business, while their degenerate brothers have been off chasing blindly down various dead ends.

Older brothers come in all shapes and sizes, all theological persuasions, all walks of life. According to Richard Lovelace, all older brothers have the same thing in common:

[They] are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, [and] are radically insecure persons... Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races [and, we might say, other theological perspectives or approaches to faith] in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger.

Older brothers aren't sure if God loves them apart from their achievements...

... are radically insecure...

... are proud and defensive of their own righteousness...

... are critical and suspicious of others...

... are constantly seeking to boost their security and validate their anger.

Older brothers, as much their wayward younger brothers, need to come home.

The father has a welcome for them, too. But it will require letting go of their false superiority, their judgments, their insecurities, their pride in understanding the system and how it's supposed to work.

Older brothers need to stop managing God and others. They need to learn how to love and to *be* loved by God.

In the end, the "lostness of the older brother could probably be summed up in two sentences.

1. **The older brother had the wrong approach to his brother.** He was too busy keeping score to care about his brother's welfare. He couldn't even bring himself to refer to him as "brother" ("this son of *yours!*").
2. **The older brother had the wrong approach to his father.** He saw his father as the formal guarantor of a system. He could barely see past himself to hear the words, "Everything I have is already yours." He was more interested in what his father could *do* for him than in his father himself.

Together, perhaps both are simply a failure in joy.

We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

The older brother was incapable of rejoicing, whether in the rescue of his brother or the love of his father.

Nearly seven years ago, in my first sermon here at LMC, I said these words:

The good news of this passage—the good news that the church is called to proclaim—is that the God we worship is a God who seeks and who finds us, however we are lost, and in whatever ways we need to be found.

This *is* good news—the very *best* news. But it requires that we accept it.

Did you notice that Jesus leaves the story “unfinished?”

We don’t know how the older brother responded to his father’s gentle rebuke, nor, for that matter, do we know how the younger son responded to the party in his honour. We don’t hear a word from either one of them after the father speaks his last words.

Perhaps, by leaving the parable unfinished like this, Jesus was inviting all the older brothers within earshot—and other older brothers like us who would hear this story years later—to provide the ending themselves.

May God save us from the older brothers that we so easily become. May God gift us with the reckless mercy that he so prodigally distributes.

May God teach us how to love and to be loved.

May God give us the grace and the wisdom to come home from wherever we have wandered.

Amen.

