

“The Prodigal Older Brother,” Luke 15:11-32
Tom Johnson, March 14, 2010

Our Scripture says that “tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.” What Luke wants us to know is this: that people with broken lives were drawn to Jesus. What some would consider to be the dregs of society were valued by Jesus.

We’re talking about white collar criminals, corrupt corporate executives, gang bangers, thugs, pimps, and prostitutes. They liked Jesus. They listened to Jesus because they were drawn to his words and his loving acceptance.

And our Scripture tells us that Jesus received them and ate with them. In other words, sinners loved Jesus because he first loved them. It was mutually amicable situation.

And it is while they are having a good time that the religious leaders and teachers, the Pharisees and the scribes complained. These religious people are party poopers, grinchers, spoilsports, sourpusses, and killjoys. And so, what does Jesus do to counteract these sticks in the mud? He tells them a story:

“There was a man who had two sons”—a younger son and an older son. The younger son is tired of rural living. He’s sick of being out in the fields. And as long as his dad is living, he will have to work the fields until he gets his inheritance.

But then a wretched thought enters his mind: how about I get my half of the inheritance now? What if dad sells half the land now and gives me the cash? This is really bad economics—you don’t sell farm land for cash unless you invest it wisely in something else. The land is there to provide food and a means for living.

But it is not only bad economics, it is hateful and spiteful toward his father. It is as if the younger brother wishes his dad dead. And one of the great marvels of this story is that his father gives him his request. The younger brother gets his inheritance and takes off.

The younger brother enjoys himself for a while. But then he runs out of money. He finds himself getting a job feeding pigs that isn’t enough money to even feed himself. He longs to eat the pig slop he’s feeding the pigs.

It’s after he hits rock bottom that he comes to himself—he finally realizes how good he had it when he was at home. Even the people working for his father earned more than enough to eat—but here he is starving in some distant land.

The younger brother sets back home. He is going home to the father with his hands empty. He is ready to admit to his father that he was wrong—that what he did not only hurt his father on earth but also his father in heaven: “I have sinned against heaven and before you.”

The younger brother is going home because he knows he will continue to starve without his father. He is going home because he sees more clearly than ever the goodness of his father.

He is going home with nothing to lose and everything to gain. He knows that the world outside his father’s house is full of empty promises, fleeting pleasures, and compassion for those who are less fortunate.

While the younger son is approaching his father's house from a great distance, his father sees him. His father may have had extraordinary vision but I think it's his extraordinary compassion.

Deep down, the father knew his son would come around. He knew his son would come home. His eyes looked over the same horizon he saw his son disappear into. His father never forgot his son. He was looking and praying for him to come home.

The father cannot wait and runs to his son. He hugs him. He dresses him in fine clothing. He puts a ring on his finger. He puts shoes on his feet. And he throws a party with the fattened calf.

When it comes for the time to eat, the father raises a glass of the finest wine and gives a toast: "To my son who was dead but is alive again. He was lost but now he is found!"

But there was someone who missed the toast—the older brother. And as the older brother approaches the house at the end of a day of work out in the fields, he hears the flutes, drums, singing, and clapping of hands.

As he comes closer, he can smell the barbeque, hear the laughter, and see the smiling faces. He has no clue what has happened or why people are throwing a party. And so he asks one of the hired hands what is going on.

"Your brother came home. Your father is throwing a party in celebration of his return—that he is back safe and sound." But the older son will not join the party. He will not celebrate his younger brother's return.

It is while they are having a good time that the older brother complains about his life at his father's house. He is a party pooper, a grinch, a spoilsport, a sourpuss, and a killjoy.

Although the older brother has not gone as far a distance as the younger brother, he has separated himself from his father's goodness. Although, he has not squandered his whole inheritance on prostitutes like the younger brother, the older brother wants to squander it on a group of his friends.

Although he is not taking care of pigs and longing to eat pig slop like his younger brother, the older brother will go hungry this night until he remembers that even the servants of the house are invited to the party.

This is not a story of the prodigal son—this is a story of the prodigal sons—two brothers who take their father for granted—two sons who separate themselves from the goodness of their father—two sons who need to come to their senses—two sons who need to make their way home.

The father's response was, "You are always with me. All that is mine is yours. It was the right thing to do—to celebrate and throw a party. For your brother was dead. But now he is alive. He was lost. But now he is found."

The story Jesus tells ends with the brother standing outside the door of the house—refusing to join the party—incapable of seeing the father's goodness—hearts cold to the miracle of a changed and redeemed life.

And we are left wanting to tell the older brother, “Can’t you just go into the house and say ‘Welcome home’? Why don’t you hug your brother’s neck and say how much you missed him? Why can’t you celebrate a life that has been transformed?”

The story ends with the religious leaders standing outside the door of the house—refusing to join Jesus’ party—incapable of seeing his goodness—hearts cold to the miracle of changed and redeemed lives.

And we are left wanting to tell the Scribes and Pharisees, “Can’t you say ‘Welcome to God’s family’? Why don’t you hug your brothers’ and sisters’ necks and celebrate lives that have been transformed?”

For Jesus, it is not a matter of good sons and prodigal sons. It is a matter of prodigal sons who have joined the party and those who still have refused to join. For Jesus, it is not a matter of if you are a prodigal son but when you will experience feeling distant from the father and when you will come home.

The older son may not be as far as his younger brother was—but both ran away from home. The older son may be as desperately hungry as his younger brother—but both denied themselves the goodness of his father’s table.

The older son’s journey may not be as sensational as his younger brother’s journey. But both were prodigal sons. The older son may not have behaved as badly outwardly as his younger brother, but neither of them deserves the father’s love. Both are dead. Both are lost.

In both cases, it is the father who is praying for and inviting prodigal sons to come home. And in the case of Jesus, he is praying for sinners to come home. He is inviting sensational sinners—the prostitutes, thugs, and corrupt white collar criminals—he invites them to life and to be found.

And he is inviting unsensational sinners—the scribes and the Pharisees—the religious leaders—he invites them to life and invites them to be found.

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals He’s waiting and watching.
Watching for you and for me

To us older brothers and to us younger brothers—to us sensational sinners and us unsensational sinners—he invites us to see his goodness and his love. To us who are weary, he calls us to come home.

Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling. Calling, O sinner, come home.

And we have this assurance. Jesus sinners doth receive.