

“THE OTHER LOST SON”

Luke 15:25-32

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I was baptized in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, went to Sunday School from a very early age. I got the gold stars for attendance and memorizing the Bible verse for the week. By early high school I had read the Bible through at least once. Sophomore year I began teaching Bible to my peers. Within three years we were a group of thirty meeting in each other's homes weekly, even through the summer. I participated in Bible Study, college fellowship and attended an inter-racial congregation in college. I scored the highest grade on the Bible content exam and was ranked among the top five of my seminary graduating class. I won the Greek prize and was the first to complete the optional thesis program.

When people use the Bible to correct some view I hold, I inwardly bristle at what I consider their audacity. It was the Bible, interpreted responsibly that persuaded me that God's call was inclusive, that love between two women or two men was just as sacred as between a man and a woman, that a pregnant teen needed counsel and compassion more than she needed judgment, that the poor, the hungry and the homeless were as loved by God and as righteous as any of us. I am, if anything, even better than the elder brother who is modeled on the Pharisees that objected to Jesus dining with sinners. I am better than the elder son because I believe in Jesus' mission to the marginal. I'm better because I wouldn't hesitate to go into the feast and welcome my lost brother home.

Feeling this way as I do, you will not be surprised to hear that I think the elder son is the most important part of this parable, at least for myself and for many others who have always belonged to the church and have always tried to do what is right. There's more I might say by way of the pedigree of my faith, but I think this little bit is enough to hear how arrogant it all sounds. This arrogance stands out consistently in the Gospels' portrayal of the Pharisees, which is why I almost always imagine myself as the Pharisee in the story: the religious leader who has belonged to the faith from the beginning, whose goal has been to say and to do what is right.

Most of us can tell a story or two from our prodigal days, but really few of us get so far off the path as this younger son. We don't declare our fathers dead by insisting on our share of the inheritance right now. We don't waste our lives on profligate living. Our selfishness rarely reduces us to the level of something less than human. We try to do the right thing and we do resent it when the prodigal is celebrated. Most of us recognize ourselves in the elder son. We don't go around reciting our pedigrees, but sometimes our "rightness" becomes self-righteous or our thankfulness for the blessings of living in the faith community leads us to the presumption of "being better than" others. God's love becomes obscured by what we perceive as God's demands.

I totally agree with Henri Nouwen when he writes: "it is clear that the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home.... He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree" (pp, 66, 69).

Nouwen remarks that the elder son looks down on his brother with “disdain,” sees his father as a “slave owner” whom he looks up to with fear (p. 82).

A lot of commentators emphasize the open-ended quality of this parable. Janet pointed out last week that the conversion of the prodigal son is not a given. Although it “coming to his sense” and returning was important for the healing of the prodigal, attending the feast was no guarantee that he had come “home.” He was welcomed and feasted and entered the house, but we’re not told whether he acknowledged or even perceived his father’s love. Just as Jesus ate with sinners didn’t necessarily mean that those sinners understood and experienced God’s love.

It’s even easier for us to see how open-ended the parable is for the elder son. He’s invited to the feast, but we aren’t told whether he goes in or not. But as I implied earlier, this isn’t the real issue. What’s at stake here is not what either son does, but what they experience or feel. I would have gone in, but I hoped you picked up that this wouldn’t necessarily make me “any better. It might just add to my own sense of self-righteousness.

Both sons are welcomed. Both sons are sought after by the father. Both are, in Nouwen’s words the “beloved of the father.” The unanswered question remains: Do they know it not as a fact, but in the whole of their person?

Jesus knows it. At his baptism, the voice declares; “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” As the beloved of God, Jesus leaves his home to travel among us. He consorted with the riffraff, ate with sinners, talked to prostitutes. He squandered his life with generosity and received for it the disdain of the religious and the wealthy, and the powerful until he lost everything, even his life. But he also honored the law, practiced a righteousness exceeding even that of the Pharisees. The lost partied with him, but no one from the established faith honored his goodness. Because he knows God’s love he leaves home to go out among the lost, to do ministry with the marginal. Because he knows God’s love, his goodness does not lead to arrogance, but instead leads to the new commandment to love one another.

If we learn anything from the elder son, we learn that “better than” does not make for good community. “Better than” breaks us down and breaks us apart. “Better than” stands behind white supremacy, patriarchy, unrestrained greed and nationalism. “Better than” exacerbates poverty and rationalizes inequity.

God does not divide the world into the wicked and the good. He refuses to see people as less than human, just as she refuses to see people as too good. In the kingdom of God people are beloved.

We don’t always, maybe we don’t even often, recognize God’s love. Sometimes we feel unworthy and sometimes we can’t see past our own misperceptions of goodness. But we are never far from the love of God, because Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. And we are all lost, some in squandering our lives and some in our own self-importance. But wherever we are, we are loved by God. Joy comes as we perceive that love and as we become vessels of that love to others. For the kingdom of God is not about duty and righteousness, but about love, an inclusive love that welcomes us home. Amen.