

Series: The Invitational Church
Today: Good People Behaving Badly
Text: Luke 15:25-32

A Communion Meditation preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

In the church of Jesus Christ, the season of Easter is more than just a day. It is a season; the seven weeks between Easter and Pentecost in which we celebrate the grace which God shows us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. During this Easter Season we have been focusing on what it means to be an invitational church, and we continue that focus this morning.

Just a month ago, when we last gathered at this table, we proclaimed the good news that there is a place at the table for everyone who places their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Two weeks ago we examined an invitation which God offers us which requires a response if we are to sit at the table of our Lord and be nourished in our spiritual journey.

Last week we focused on the first half of what we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but we learned that the parable has less to do with the prodigal ways of the son than it has to do with the character of the father. Don Hackett helped us to see that the father in this parable did a number of things which would have been uncharacteristic in Jewish culture. First, he gave his younger son the inheritance that was not rightly his until his father had died. He divided his wealth according to the formula: One third was to go to the younger son, and the remaining two thirds he kept for himself to pass on to the elder son upon his death.

Needless to say, it pained the father to hear about the son wasting his fortune in a distant land. Yet, when the son came to his senses and returned to his home, the father

does a second uncharacteristic act. He ran to meet him in spite of the fact that Jewish men of his stature did not run. Then he did a third uncharacteristic thing. He offered unwarranted grace to his son proclaiming “*This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*” And finally, he gave a party for him. The scripture last week ended with these words: “*And they began to celebrate.*”

There was a place at the table for the son who had squandered the inheritance his father had given him. The hospitality of the Father does not hold a grudge. Instead it welcomes home the least acceptable of us and assures us that we belong.

It is not without reason that the story of the Prodigal Son has been called one of the greatest short stories in the world. It is a story of God’s unconditional and unilateral love that allows each one of us to travel to whatever the far country is that we may have traveled; a God who lets us make our mistakes without ever giving up on us. It is a classic theme that has inspired authors and poets and playwrights for centuries who love to tell and retell stories of the love of father for son which the child in all of us wants and needs to hear.

A classic example is the short story of Ernest Hemingway about a father and his teenage son. In the story, the relationship had become somewhat strained, and the teenage son ran away from home. His father began a journey in search of that rebellious son.

Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate attempt to find the boy, the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the Hotel Montana at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Papa." The next day, in front of the Hotel Montana, eight hundred Pacos showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness. They were all seeking the love of their father.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is a favorite of many because it tells a story we all long to hear. However, what is often not told is the story of the elder brother which is our text for this morning. He is not pleased with the actions of the father. In fact, he is incredulous. He cannot believe his eyes that his brother is receiving something which perhaps he had secretly wanted. We don't know if it was decorum which kept him from asking for his father's love. Perhaps he simply had it in his mind that his duty as the eldest son kept him from receiving the love that the Father has for him. He would not be the first son, nor will he be the last son, who longs to please his father and feels as though he can never get it right.

Most of us recognize this elder brother for we share many of his characteristics. He is a good person, a moral person, and an industrious person. He has lived his whole life by the rules, and there is an expectation in him that others should do the same. He does not understand people like his brother who waste their time and squander their money. Moreover, he cannot understand his father's behavior in welcoming his younger brother home. How can someone who has broken his father's heart be welcomed back into the family again?

He is a good man, but he behaves badly when it comes to being gracious. It made no difference to him that his brother had taken only one third of the Father's wealth. There were still two thirds left which would one day belong to him. His expression of love is one of duty, not grace. Duty demands performance. Grace is unconditional.

What his father does, simply doesn't make sense to him. It doesn't make sense to many of us, either, and it surely is not the prevailing message in our culture. We believe that people "get what they deserve," don't we? If people have behaved badly, they

deserve to be punished for their misbehavior. Good people can behave badly when it comes to extending the grace which the Father wants to offer. So what is it that this story teaches us about ourselves which we can seek to change?

Lesson #1

The first lesson we learn is about our relationship with God. The reaction of the older brother teaches us that faith is more about obeying the rules for some people than it is about the grace which God wants to offer us. We have the notion that if we are good enough, we will receive God's favor, and conversely, if we are bad enough we will receive God's wrath. So we live by the rules, and there is nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong, that is, until our rules become more important to us than the grace of God. If our rules say you have to have your life in order before you can receive God's grace, we have missed the point of the gospel, and we will surely miss the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of God's love as we see lives changed by God's power.

One of my favorite stories is about an encounter which took place at a church not unlike First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA. It was a stately, downtown building where good people came to worship; well dressed, well polished, and well scrubbed. One Sunday a college student named Bill decided to attend. He is wild haired; and his wardrobe for college is jeans and a T-shirt with holes in it. He walks in late and is shoeless.

The sanctuary is full, but there is room, if someone is willing to give up their favorite seat, and we all have a favorite seat, don't we? You know where you like to sit, and if you don't, ask me because I know where you like to sit. I can usually tell if someone is out of town or not feeling well because they aren't in their favorite spot.

Anyway, Bill heads down the aisle looking for a seat, and while he gets many looks of astonishment, no one is going to give up their favorite seat. Having nearly reached the pulpit, he realizes there are no empty seats, so he squats down on the carpet. The congregation is feeling uncomfortable. Then from the back of the church, a gray-haired elder in a three-piece suit starts walking toward Bill with a cane. The worshipers don't expect a man in his eighties to understand some college kid on the floor. With all eyes focused on the developing drama, the minister waits to begin his sermon until the elder does what he has to do. The elderly man drops his cane on the floor and with great difficulty lowers himself to sit next to Bill.

When the pastor got up to deliver his message, he began with these words: "What I'm about to preach you'll never remember. What you've just seen, you'll never forget."

The first lesson we learn from the older brother is how dangerous the attitude of superiority can be. He was unable to accept the graciousness of the Father toward the wayward son, and he kept himself from joining the celebration of the Father's love. Like him, superiority can keep us from receiving the grace which God longs to offer us through unexpected and chance meetings with the people whom God may love. We miss the opportunities to understand more of God through the Bills of the world because they don't fit our expectation of those whom God loves.

Lesson #2

The second lesson we learn from the elder brother's reaction is the impact it has on our ability to share our love with others. It is the attitude of the older brother that keeps us from demonstrating the love which God has for those we find difficult to love. His attitude of self-righteousness had turned him into the kind of man who would have

cheerfully kicked his brother farther into the gutter when he was already down instead of offering the compassion which God has for all people.

Max Lucado writes about a big, muscle-bound man named Daniel who was swindled by his own brother. He vowed that if he ever saw him again, he would break his neck. A few months later, Daniel became a Christian. Even so, he couldn't forgive his brother. One day, the inevitable encounter took place on a busy avenue. This is how Daniel described what happened:

"I saw him, but he didn't see me. I felt my fists clench and my face get hot. My initial impulse was to grab him around the throat and choke the life out of him. But as I looked into his face, my anger began to melt. For as I saw him, I saw the image of my father. I saw my father's eyes. I saw my father's look. I saw my father's expression. And as I saw my father in his face, my enemy once again became my brother."

Conclusion

There is a place at this table for both the younger brother who needs the forgiveness of the Father as well as the older brother who needs to learn of the Father's grace. Who are you? With whom do you identify? There is a place here for you because the grace of God which was purchased by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ invites you to come home and experience the fullness of the Father's love.