

Sermon 3-14-2010
The Prodigal Son

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This story would have been quite nice

If it had stopped with the Father's loving welcome to the Son.

We love happy endings,

And this would have been such a sweet ending,

The violin music swelling with heartfelt feeling,

As the Father goes running down the road

To meet his wayward Son.

They embrace,

right as the music rises in pitch and reaches a climactic chord,

dripping with unspeakable emotions of joy and love.

The father puts the ring on his Son,

the robe about his shoulders,

And the scene cuts to the party,

The banquet,

Where Father and son sit together,

Misty-eyed with joy over their reunion,

The Father beaming next to his son,

This lost Son who had been so famished with hunger as he made his long journey home.

We see set before him a plate of delicious, rich food,
And perhaps he and his father share one more joyful embrace.
That would have been a lovely ending.
An ending that gives us all warm fuzzies,
An ending that is easy and free of challenge,
An ending for the feel-good parable of the year.
But Jesus is not about nice, easy, endings.
Jesus is not about giving us all warm fuzzies.
Jesus challenges us,
And so he goes on ...
Here is the Elder brother.
The good brother.
The one who did everything right –
Not just the bare minimum that was expected of him,
But this elder son slaved away for his father,
Bending over backwards to be a good son and do the right thing.
It is this Son who says what we all might have noticed,
If we weren't so caught up in the sweetness and happiness of the reunion
scene.
It is this son who points out the scandal,
That everything has NOT turned out the way it is supposed to

That things are NOT as they should be,

That something is wrong.

“It’s not fair,”

He says.

“It’s not fair.”

And indeed, it’s not.

There is truth to what the Older son says.

He’s not just being mean.

You see,

When the younger brother,

The prodigal son,

Told his father he wanted his inheritance early,

It was like saying to him,

“I wish you would hurry up and die.”

Or “I don’t care about you or my brother or this land or our neighbors or anything else except that money.”

Extremely hurtful.

Furthermore, in the culture of the time,

The son’s behavior would have been not only internally hurtful to the father,

But would have constituted a public humiliation,

A grave insult that a man in this patriarchal culture would never have put up with.

The son dis-honored his father,

Shamed him in the eyes of the community,

And the expected response would have been that the father dis-own his Son,

And punish him if possible.

When the Son returned to him,

It would have been completely within the father's rights –

And the expectations of the community -

For the father not only to ignore the son's pleas,

But even to punish him extremely severely and publicly,

In order for the father to restore his own honor.

So for the father to further demean himself,

By leaping up and running to greet his lost Son,

Would have been unheard-of.

And then, without even an attempt to punish,

To restore honor,

To make it clear that he was in fact still the Father, the Patriarch,

the one who must be respected and obeyed,

Without any of this,

Gave the prodigal son,

Literally, The royal treatment –

The best robe in the house,

A ring,

A banquet with meat from the largest, fattest, and most costly animal the father owned.

Yes, something is wrong with this picture.

It is Not fair.

The son who has been good never even got to have a little party,

A few buddies over to share a measly little goat.

Where was his reward?

Where was his banquet?

His ring?

Didn't the son who had done everything right,

Worked so hard to be so good,

Didn't HE deserve a reward?

Things are NOT the way they should be, here.

It's not fair.

In the good Son's question to his father,

In his jealousy,

His resentment,

We hear our own voice.

And this is why the story is no longer about warm fuzzies

And the happy ending.

It's not just the feel-good parable of the year,

Because here we have a direct challenge,

And we are forced to admit that not only does the jealous brother have a point,

But also that this whole reunion,

This whole party,

This whole celebration and banquet,

Is scandalous.

On some level, it seems wrong.

It defies the bounds of social norms and expectations,

It flouts our ideas of just rewards and punishments

And pays no heed to merit –

To who deserves what,

Who has earned what.

The father's welcome of his prodigal son in this way

Is so extravagant,

So out of place with the reality of the situation,

So heedless of what this bad child has actually DONE,

That it violates our understandings of how things should be,

And how things are supposed turn out.

“It’s not fair,” We all cry.

Indeed, the elder brother’s voice here seems like The voice of what is sensible and reasonable.

It is our voice.

We are so obsessed with who deserves what.

And like the older brother in this story,

We often find ourselves stewing in jealousy and resentment because we don’t think we’ve gotten what we deserve,

Or someone else has gotten a better deal than us.

I’m good.

I pay my bills and treat people nice and do the right thing.

I work hard.

I deserve to have it better than that other guy.

I earned it.

And so we hear our own voice in the protests of the older brother.

But here is where the story turns

Away from the brothers,

Away from who has done what,

Away from who has been good and who has been bad.

The story turns to the extravagant love of the father.

Again, disregarding social etiquette,

OR any notion of honor or shame,

The father leaves his guests,

Leaves his own party,

And goes out into the dark and the night to plead with the eldest son.

“Everything I have is yours,”

The father says.

“Nothing has been taken away from you.”

And here is the secret of God’s grace.

God’s grace is Not Fair.

It is something better than fair,

God’s grace is so extravagant

that all notions of what is fair and who deserves what,

All those calculations of just rewards,

Become irrelevant.

It’s not about just rewards.

The word “deserve” is not in the vocabulary of God’s grace.

Nor should it be in the Christian vocabulary.

God’s grace cannot be earned or bargained for,

But neither can it be “used up”.

God’s love and grace is scandalous,

Defying our expectations,

Our understanding of social rules and etiquette,

And violating our deeply held principles about “just deserts.”

It flies in the face of beliefs about how we have to get what we earn –

And earn what we get.

But that is the nature of a love that is infinite,

Love that is boundless, without any limits.

When someone else gets some,

When someone else gets A LOT,

The extravagant abundance of the reward, the banquet, honor, rejoicing and complete love,

In order for someone else to get this lavishness,

It doesn’t mean that we have to get less.

In fact, it means more for everybody.

More celebration,

More feasting, More wine,

More music, More dancing.

We are called to join in the celebration,

The party,

To go into the father's house and take a place at the banquet table.

We don't know whether or not the older Son in our story goes inside and joins the party.

It is an open question,

And it is the fundamental question for all of us.

Will we join in the extravagant, lavish, scandalous celebration?

Will we participate in the banquet and the singing and the dancing,

The wine and the rich food of the feast?

Or will we stand outside in the dark and the cold,

All alone,

Thinking about who is good and who is bad

Calculating who deserves what,

And how much people deserve,

And who has done what to whom,

And whether someone has actually earned what they got.

Will we stand outside in the dark and the cold,

Counting and tallying rewards and punishment on our fingers,

Muttering and grumbling about what is fair,

While ignoring the sound of music and feasting drifting out from the warm home?