

In Defense of the Older Brother

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

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Believe it or not, I am prepared to defend the older brother in this well-known parable. Yes, I know that Luke the gospel-writer has caught him forever in a particularly unlovely moment. I know that the older brother ends up looking a little like Frank Burns in all those old *M.A.S.H.* reruns. I know he comes across as jealous and priggish. I cringe every bit as much as you do when he sounds so spiteful talking to his father, standing out there in the dark while there's a big party going on inside to celebrate the younger brother's return home. "For all these years," he whines, "I have been working like a slave for you; ...yet you have never even given me a young goat." I cringe when he says that. And not only that, I wish he hadn't even thought about saying what he says next: "But when this son of yours came back...." "Son of yours"! Not something more relational, like "brother of mine," but "son of yours"! I just wish he hadn't said that. I wish he hadn't sounded so accusatory in what he said next, with all that speculation about prostitutes. Methinks he doth protest too much when he talks like that. I wish, for sure, that this disappointed son could have counted to ten or something, could have held his tongue until he'd had a chance to go on a long bike ride or to hit the Stairmaster or to see his therapist or in some way to work out his frustrations.

Then, maybe, I wish he could have written his father a nice, measured letter. "Dear Dad, I understand your position. I know you've been lonely; I celebrate with you that the waiting is over and that my dear brother is home. Believe me, nobody is happier about that than I am, and nothing that I will say next is designed to take away from any of that, but could it be that you might consider another perspective, etc., etc., etc." I wish he could have slept on it, and then, maybe, written a measured letter like that. Most of all, I wish Luke could have nuanced his character a little more, so that the Christian church wouldn't have spent twenty centuries piling on so, and fussing so at this older brother.

But be all of that as it may, I am prepared, believe it or not, to defend this older brother.

After all, many of us are older brothers or older sisters; because of that fact alone, there ought to be on this man's behalf a certain amount of empathy or, at the very least, the benefit of the doubt. Lord knows, every older child in this room knows something about the burden that particular status brings with it. "Sweetheart, watch your little sister at the bus stop." "Son, don't walk so fast that your little brother can't keep up with you." "Now, listen, we can't keep permitting you to have friends come to play if you're not going to make sure that the little one is included, too." "Oh, your mom and I know that she annoys you sometimes, that she goes into your room and listens to your CD player, that she follows you around, that she wants everything you have, that she wants to play with your friends, and on and on; but you know, it's only because she loves you."

There is a burden that comes with being the older brother or the older sister; it's

the burden of responsibility. You've got to be quiet when the baby's asleep. You've got to be a big boy and help Mom carry the groceries. You've got to understand when Dad says, "Now, now, don't hit him back like that. I know he's hurting you, but he doesn't know that. He's too young, yet."

Every older brother and older sister in this room knows about that burden. It's the burden of responsibility.

I know of an older brother who had to be a big boy the day his younger brother was born. "Your aunts and uncles are coming," his parents said, "and you're going to have to be a little man. You're going to have to help us keep the house clean for them because we're going to be at the hospital a lot, and even when Mommy comes home from the hospital, your little brother's going to be there for a while longer. He's very sick, don't you see, and the doctors aren't sure he's going to make it. He's what we call 'premature.' That's why all the aunts and uncles are coming in. They want to see him because...because we're not sure he's going to make it." This older brother did what he was supposed to do; he was responsible—he did what he was told.

Six or seven years later, when that same little brother had rheumatic fever, it was more time in the hospital, more family in. "You're going to have to call off that slumber party. We know it's your birthday, but your little brother's sick. And when he comes home, you and your friends will have to play quietly inside or play outside, because he's going to need his rest." And so this older brother did what he was supposed to do.

A few years later still, when the family moved, the older brother came home from college. "Son, you know your little brother's not really getting on in this new town. We were hoping he would enjoy hunting and fishing and things like that, but he's having a hard time with this move. We're wondering if he might not need to go off to school. The older brother saw catalogs for military schools and boarding schools all over the house, and he noticed that they just made the younger brother more withdrawn, more unhappy.

But the younger brother didn't seem to have the words, yet, to put around his unhappiness. What he did notice was that the older brother began paying more attention to him. "Hey Sport," he said, "let's go get a milkshake." "Let's go to a movie." "I want you to come see me at college for a weekend." He paid attention to his little brother, and that attention made a big difference.

He noticed that the little brother loved radio—radio stations, radio disc jockeys, the weekly "top forty"—and so he bought his little brother a tape player, and he started sending him tapes of famous radio personalities. Cousin Brucie in New York, Chuck Buell in Chicago, Doctor John in Nashville, Wolfman Jack in Los Angeles. His little brother could name the "top forty" radio station for every city in the country, and in those days his little brother wanted nothing quite so much as to be a deejay.

When his little brother became a teenager, the older brother began to notice something the parents hadn't noticed. He began to notice that the little brother asked a lot of questions about God and seemed interested in strange topics like church and creeds and the catechism. Not that the little brother asked those questions in public, but the older brother caught on to it. And on his little brother's fifteenth birthday, the big brother gave him a gift—not a basketball or a golf club or a new Beatles album, but a copy of *The Book of Common Worship*.

That book still sits on a shelf in my study. Though hardly perfect, my older brother

was, for a number of crucial, developmental years, one person in my little universe who, at several critical junctures, understood and nurtured me. A few years ago, when I was going through some old family pictures I had discovered, I found one that I cherish. It's the picture of a little baby, asleep in a crib, who because of his difficult birth was showered with attention. And standing next to the crib, reaching his hand through the slats to stroke the baby's back while he's asleep, is a nine-year-old boy whose job in the midst of crisis was to "be a little man" —my older brother.

So, you see, it's personal. And as I stand here this morning to defend the older brother in this parable, I am defending my older brother, too. He, like older brothers and sisters everywhere, has often been given the great burden of responsibility. So much so that, what we often don't see—in this text and in the texts of our own lives—is that laced throughout that burden of responsibility is also an altogether lighter burden, the burden of grace.

The grace that is so obvious in this text is the grace of that father, who, when the younger brother comes home, kills the fatted calf and throws a big party.

But look into your hearts, you older brothers and sisters here in this room—you who are so responsible. You know something of grace, too, don't you? You see it, maybe, in the pleasure that surely that older brother saw in this text—the satisfaction, maybe, of looking out over a field sprouting green and taking in the beauty of it. The pleasure, maybe, of coming back to that field at harvest time, and delighting in the weight of the sacks of grain filled from the threshing floor. It is the grace of work enjoyed and done well, of a household that runs smoothly with people fed and homework supervised and talents encouraged. Of a creative gift identified and cultivated—maybe it's art, maybe it's a facility for numbers, maybe it's a passion for public service, maybe it's teaching, maybe it's the joy of leadership—and through this gift the community prospers and is blessed. That's grace, too, isn't it? If it's not the grace that is magnificently conferred upon the prodigals in our midst who screw up royally and are yet embraced and celebrated, then maybe it's a quieter grace. But it's grace all the same.

The father in this text knows this. Standing there in the dark and cold with the party going on inside, he says as much to the older brother. "Son," he says, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." If that's not an act of grace that is every bit as big and outrageous a thing as the sight of that same father running down the road to meet his other son, then I don't know what grace is!

Sometimes the confirmation of grace for people who make good decisions and act responsibly is the grace of knowing that their decisions are good and their acts are responsible. And all of that is to the glory of God.

Search your hearts, you older brothers and sisters—you who so often are the ninety-nine who take care of yourselves and thus enable the shepherd to leave and go look for the lost. Search your hearts, and answer this one: Has the church across its existence been fair to this older brother? Is the contrast in this story really as stark as we make it out to be? Is it really that of black versus white with no shades of gray—of a bad son who's really good versus the good son who's really bad?

And if that's the case, how can older brothers and older sisters ever get the pleasure of going home when they're already home? How can they confess the squandering of resources, the harlots, the months and years of neglect, when in fact they have built and not squandered, have stayed and not gone with harlots, have been responsible for

preserving, not spilling, the family fortune? Does all of that discipline and self-restraint and purposeful living have to lead to the conclusion of pinched self-righteousness that we so often lay on this older brother? Or is it not instead the case that the words of that grace-filled father echo down through all the ages? “You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours!”

It may well be that the grace given to that older brother is a grace deeper, broader, and wider than that given to the Prodigal, and the invitation given to the older brother is to see and appreciate the very grace he has always had. The good news in this text for you older brothers and sisters in this room may well be to survey what has always been there for you and to see it for the first time, maybe, as yours not by your own merit but rather by the grace of God.

The lush, green fields in your life that you have planted and harvested—the successes, in other words, over which you have presided diligently—do you think that you accomplished that all by yourself? Or are they not the gifts of God’s grace? The children whom you have brought into the world to clothe and feed and nurture and grow and finally to launch out of the nest—are they not tokens of God’s favor? The prodigal brothers and sisters whose lives you have touched and helped untangle—are they not symbols of God’s abiding presence with you? This church to which you have given a gallon of blood, which is standing here in large part because of your unfailing energy, a church of conscientious older siblings if there was ever such a church—is it not here, ultimately, because God desires that it be here?

And even if your sins are not for the most part flamboyant but frankly a little boring, even if you are here this morning because in fact you have never left home, God forgives you, too. In fact, I believe that it’s the sign of a greater grace that God does not have to run down the road to meet you, and to hug you and kiss you and summon a feast for you—because you’re already here. And indeed, for you, the feast has already been in progress for quite some time.

In fact, God so loved the world that God gave God’s own older son for you, too. That’s right. And this fact alone riles the Pharisees more than anything else. They are expecting Jesus to come and be the world’s ultimate Older Brother—drawing lines and keeping the rules and making everybody else keep them, too. So they never forgive him for becoming, in fact, the ultimate Older Brother gone to seed. Earlier in Luke’s gospel, they fuss about his friend John the Baptist who didn’t eat bread and didn’t drink wine; they say, “He has a demon.” And later they fuss about Jesus who came onto the scene eating bread and drinking wine; they say, “He eats and drinks with sinners.” He can’t win; they’re always at him. The real issue, theologically speaking—the issue that just rubs them raw—is that, all across the pages of the gospels, he leaves them outside in the cold and goes in himself to join in the festive party. He’s supposed to be all the time drawing and reinforcing lines in the world, and instead he’s forever stepping over them in the name of a God who so loved us that God gave the ultimate Older Brother to put his arms around every prodigal in the world.

So how dare we dismiss the older brother here in this text! He’s more than we make of him. For he, too, knows more than he’s letting on about the sustaining grace and mercy of God. Maybe that’s good news for you older brothers and older sisters. I know it’s good news for me, for in the curious way that life can often double back around on us, I’ve taken my turn in recent years at being the older brother. There have been moments in my adult life when it’s been my privilege to say to him, in so many words,

“Hey Sport, let’s go get a milkshake.” And maybe the net effect of it all has been that he, too, came into the party from out in the cold, and together we got a glimpse of God’s magnanimous grace.

Will Willimon has told the story of the days back in the seventies when he was a graduate student here in Atlanta, at Emory. He supported himself by serving two little rural churches on weekends. They were many miles, and at least two centuries, from Atlanta. It was a difficult job for Willimon—in great measure, I suspect, because these little churches were just filled with our very worst caricatures of older brothers and older sisters. Just filled with people always being spiteful and pinched, always drawing lines and refusing to come in out of the cold.

One Sunday when he pulled up at one of the churches, he discovered that there was a padlock on the front door, put there by the local sheriff. It seems that some of these church members, at a board meeting a few days earlier, had had some sort of argument that ended up with everybody just writing off everybody else. It had gotten so bad that people began taking back things they had given the church. Someone started ripping up carpet, someone else began dragging out pews. Somehow the sheriff had gotten called, and he had put a padlock on the door to give people a little time to settle down. “I was miserable that entire fall,” Willimon writes. “Nothing went well. I was so depressed. One afternoon, I poured out my story to my professor of pastoral counseling, Dr. Rodney Hunter.” Willimon told Rod about the fights after the board meetings. He told him about the way the church’s families had shunned each other, had refused to be in community with each other.

“Can you believe that people, calling themselves church members and Christians,” he said, “can sink to such behavior? Isn’t it outrageous?”

Rod agreed. He said that it was outrageous that a person of Willimon’s gifts and graces should be trapped out there with such people.

And then he went on to say, “And the most outrageous thing of all is that Jesus says they get into God’s kingdom too!”

That’s the good news—and it’s not just for prodigals, but for older brothers and older sisters, too. Which means, of course, that we’re all invited to God’s grand and ongoing party. We’re all invited in, out of the cold.