

“Homecoming”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
on March 31, 2019

When people talk of the Parable of the Prodigal Son—as it is inaptly named—they most often talk about the character of the prodigal—that is, the son who left. But Jesus directs his parable at the sons who stay—that is, the Pharisees who toil and labor so hard for God and then bitterly complain that Jesus welcomes and eats with sinners.

If we are to hear this parable in the way that Jesus intended it to be heard, I think we have to situate ourselves with the Pharisee and identify with the elder son. For me, this isn't hard to do. I'm literally an eldest child AND I've been in church all my life AND I'm a religious leader AND I was totally a goody two shoes growing up. Followed all the rules. The rule-following may be less true now that I'm a pastor, but on the whole, I'm really pretty straight-laced. Very law-abiding citizen. Never even had a speeding ticket. I actually have a horribly over-active conscience and get anxiety that I might have done something wrong without even knowing about it. I truly don't break rules unless I feel a moral imperative to do so. As a teenager my friends' parents used to be like, “Oh, Kyndall will be there? Then of course you can go. Nothing will happen if Kyndall's there.” This is all true. Everyone used to see me as the good kid. And then, in adulthood, I cut my hair short, and suddenly people thought I must be a rebel. It was very weird. I'm thinking about getting a tattoo just to really mess with people. Anyway, the point of all that is to say, I don't know how much you can identify with the elder son. Maybe you're more of a prodigal. I'm just saying, he is me. Jesus is talking to me. Which is almost as painful as finding out I didn't make the starting line-up on varsity or, God-forbid, I made a B on a test. Which are pains I fortunately have little to no experience with. See? I'd make a great Pharisee. Which I'm not supposed to be proud of, but just so you know, if there were a like a Pharisee contest, I would beat you.

Here's the thing for all us elder-son types out there: the season of Lent asks us to understand ourselves as the lost ones, which can be a hard pill to swallow if you are used to being the teacher's pet and mommy's little angel. As Henri Nouwen says, “There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home.” That's the parable, right? The elder son is the most lost of all, because there's this party, this feast, this celebration happening, and he stays outside, pouting, because the party isn't for him, and he misses it!

How about we take a break from talking about me—I mean him—and focus elsewhere for a minute, okay? So I found myself getting really curious this year about the younger son and why he left. We know he made poor decisions after leaving, so we often assume the decision to leave was also bad. But I got to thinking. Maybe not. Maybe he'd suffered something really terrible and needed time away. Maybe his older brother bullied him and he couldn't take it anymore. Maybe he couldn't get along with his dad, for good reasons. Maybe he was on a quest for meaning, but then he got sidetracked and things went awry. Not everyone who leaves does so for bad reasons.

Biblical commentators often point out that asking for his inheritance so early was like saying to his father, “I wish you were already dead.” But I also started wondering, why on earth did Dad say yes? Like, you’re the grown-up; it’s your money. Say no, dude. Or give him fifty bucks. But not the whole thing. Good grief. Was it simple resignation on the father’s part? A sort of unhealthy, no-boundaries generosity? Was it because he was hurt and angry? “Fine. Take it. Good riddance.” Was he anxious to get rid of him? As far as we know, the father doesn’t make any attempts to communicate with the son after he leaves. I just wonder if there was some difficult dynamic between them already so that when the son comes back and the father embraces him, it is not only the son’s repentance—i.e. change of heart—but also the father’s? After all, they move towards one another. The movement is mutual.

I don’t know. Jesus doesn’t really get into those details, but I think what we are supposed to get is that the older son sort of benefited from this division between father and younger son whether it was a mutual offense or a one-sided one. I mean, sure, he stayed around and worked hard, but he also got to be the favorite son. The one that showed up in the family Christmas letters each year listing all his latest achievements. And there is a good chance that by peacing out early, his little brother got a smaller “half” of the inheritance because if the farm continued to amass wealth over time, sticking around was financially the better move.

So when baby brother shows back up and big brother gets mad, I wonder if in part he is bemoaning the loss of certain privileges that come with essentially being the only child. He’ll no longer be the favored one. So this return of the younger brother to an equal position in the family feels to the other brother like a loss for him, like he is being undervalued, unseen, and unappreciated. In truth he is losing nothing of real importance, but it feels like loss to him.

I am reminded of when we got a dog when I was kid, and the dog toys kept mysteriously disappearing until my mom figured out that my little sister, who was two-years-old at the time, kept hiding the dog toys behind the TV, we assume out of jealousy. Now was the new dog a real threat to my parent’s love and affection for my sister? Definitely not. But in her two-year-old mind, the threat was real.

So for us, when other people receive God’s favor or society’s attention or they just finally attain real equity—the question for us is whether our minds are mature enough to accept this new reality as non-threatening. Do we respond from our two-year-old minds or from our hearts-at-rest-in-God’s-abundance?

The thing is, feelings feel stuff. You cannot just stop feeling threatened because a sermon tells you to. So what do we do when we have feelings that prevent us from accepting God’s grace for others or their advancement in society?

My first inclination is to send the elder son to therapy, but I recognize that wasn’t an option available to him at the time. (I still recommend it for all of us though.) Here’s what transpires in the parable: The father goes out to his older son, just like he went out to meet the younger. And he doesn’t scold him for how he’s feeling. He doesn’t shame him into attending the party and pretending to like it. Rather, he reminds him of what he already has. “Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.” And maybe the subtext is this: “Even for you, my

overachieving, perfectionist son, even for you, the grace has always been free and abundant, unearned and ever-flowing.”

It is a lot harder to be judgmental of others when you finally accept yourself as already enough, isn't it? Judgment feeds off insecurity; judgmental-ism isn't a necessary skill if you're secure and know that you are deeply loved. It's the same with fear. You don't have to be afraid of losing privilege if you already know there's enough for everybody.

I like the way Henri Nouwen puts it:

“For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not “How am I to find God?” but “How am I to let myself be found by him?” The question is not “How am I to know God?” but “How am I to let myself be known by God?” And, finally, the question is not “How am I to love God?” but “How am I to let myself be loved by God?” God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.”

My dear friends, whether you are an eldest child or a prodigal one, whether you had a strained relationship with your earthly parents or whether they were proud of you but you felt you had to earn their love . . . either way, may you hear your Heavenly Father, the Great Mother, say to you this day, “My child you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. Even for you, the grace is and has always been free and abundant, unearned and ever-flowing. Quit striving. Quit running. Quit apologizing. Quit trying to prove yourself. Quit comparing yourself to others. Quit stewing and obsessing. Just come home and rest. Come home. I love you so much. There's no need to be jealous or angry that I love your brother too. Just come home.” Amen.