This summer we’re looking at some of the parables of Christ. A few weeks ago we said a parable is like a time-bomb. It’s a simple story about everyday stuff like work and family. It doesn’t sound religious (God’s name is seldom mentioned). So I lower my guard and listen and the parable plants itself in my imagination and ticks away. Then, one day it goes off. I’m out for a walk or cleaning up the kitchen or drifting off to sleep, and BOOM! It hits me that “simple story” was anything but. It breaks through my defenses and reveals the truth of God in a new and transforming way.

We looked at the first part of Luke 15 a few weeks ago and saw there are three parables in this chapter all about stuff that’s lost – a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. But we didn’t read the whole chapter. Like today we stopped at verse 24, just as the welcome-home party is getting under way. But the story Jesus told doesn’t end there. As we see in verse 11 it’s about “a man who had two sons.” Not one but two. There’s the well-known younger one, the “prodigal son” preachers love to talk about. And then there’s the older one, the dutiful first-born whom preachers usually ignore or turn into a cartoon figure – a mean-spirited jerk so full of pride he won’t even set foot in the party.

But the story Jesus tells is more complex than that, and today I want us to pay particular attention to the final part of this parable. First we’ll read it from Luke’s Gospel. And then I’d like to say a few words in defense of the elder brother. In fact, since I’m a first-born myself, I’d like to speak as if I were this guy and let you hear his side of the story and see if you don’t find some of yourself in him.  

Listen now to the parable of the elder brother:

Luke 15:25-32 (TNIV)

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

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I cannot deny that angry outburst the preachers love to pounce on. It was... unfortunate. I had come in from the fields that evening and when I heard the sound of music and dancing and smelled the roasting meat I was surprised and asked a servant what was happening. I cannot deny the jealous fury that rose in me when I learned it was a party for my wayward brother. I exploded in a rage that surprised everyone, including me, and I said things that should never be said.

I'm not trying to excuse my reaction. But I want to describe what it's like to be an elder brother. I think many of you will understand, and to be honest I need that understanding.

Let me say first that being the elder child has some advantages. How many of you are first-borns? You're in good company. Did you know almost all U.S. Presidents were first-borns? Ditto for the astronauts sent into space. Jesus himself was a first born and so are most clergy persons. Elder siblings, all. If you're a first-born, you know what that means. You get more pictures in the family album and lots of video footage of your every first event. That's a perk. And no embarrassing hand-me-downs to have to wear – that's another. But there are some disadvantages. As a first-born you're supposed to break-in the new parents. They practice on you. They learn by making mistakes on you. And then you're supposed to smile and step aside as they apply their improved parenting skills on the younger siblings. Oh, and don't forget you take the rap for the little criminals when they mess up. After all, you're the big brother or sister. You're supposed to know better.

See, being an elder sibling means being responsible. By the time I was twenty I was responsible for the family farm. We had servants, of course, lots of them. But there's a difference between being a servant and an owner. Servants take orders, but owners are the ones who take responsibility. We must decide when the fields are ready to plow and what seed to plant, how many sheep the land can support, and when to shear them. And in the bad years, when the crops fail or the sheep die, we are responsible to see that enough has been set aside so the farm can continue and the servants get fed.

Do you think that I had no moments – no days, weeks, months – when I wanted to walk away from it all? That I have no hunger for wine, women and song? Do you think I was born a drudge? No, I was born an elder brother, son of aging parents who looked to me to shoulder the responsibility of being an owner. From the get-go, I was taught to be accountable, as though everyone and everything depended on me. I say this with only a touch of pride: “Responsibility” is my middle name.

There are those who come to a party, and there are those who work to prepare that party, who make sure the house is clean, that there is enough food and wine, that the musicians are in place. There are those who go home from the party singing happy songs, and there are those of us who clean up after them, sweeping crumbs from the floor and wiping the wet circles left by glasses on the table. There are those who come as guests and go home carefree, and there are those who prepare for the party and clean up when the revelry is over, and I am one of the latter.

I'm an elder brother. It's what we do.
Let me also say that elder brothers are harder to love. I wonder sometimes why so many find it so easy to love people like my younger brother. (Notice that I call him my brother. It was only in that awful moment of anger when the worst came out and I called him "this son of yours" to my father’s face.) Why is he so loveable? He reeks of sin. He squandered money that came from generations of hard work on the farm. Threw it away on prostitutes! Came home with nothing. Why is it so easy to welcome the wayward, to embrace the irresponsible? Perhaps they’re so vulnerable, so obviously in trouble that they pose no threat. Perhaps it’s easier to love people like that – the drunks and the derelicts, those whose sins are glaring and obvious.

I know I have been pictured as self-righteous, the hardest kind of person to love. I know that. But look into your own hearts, you who are elder brothers and sisters, those of you who, like me, are responsible. You know that we are sinners, too, but our sins seem so unspectacular. Last week I was working with the servants in the field. The sun grew hot and I found myself pounding the ground so hard with my hoe that I broke the handle. And just the other day a goat kicked over a pail of milk and I got so mad I kicked the goat. You can laugh, but that’s what it’s like being an elder sibling. And what am I supposed to do? Go home and say, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I was angry and broke a hoe, and last week I kicked a goat.”

You can see why we elder brothers and sisters make such good Presbyterians, can’t you? We are nothing if not decent and in order. Our sins are not obvious or easily shared. We keep them hidden away deep inside. And so we are harder to love.

But I want to say that being responsible has its rewards. My reward is working a field of wheat as it ripens, then gathering the harvest and seeing sacks of grain fill on the threshing floor. My reward is a job well-done, the farm running smoothly, people fed and bills paid. My satisfaction is the respect of those around me. We elder brothers and sisters, we are gold-watch people. We are the ninety-and-nine who take care of ourselves, the ones whom the shepherd can leave to look for the lost.

But it is so hard to see that no-good son of my father... Excuse me. It is so hard to see my younger brother come home empty handed and receive the ring and the robe and the sandals. You understand: that’s my ring, my robe, my sandals. Mine, not his. He’d already received his share – and squandered it! The rest belongs to me. Ah, the anger is not all gone, is it? And what makes me so angry isn’t my brother’s return or even my father’s willingness to forgive. What infuriates me is this celebration my father threw for him. Let the wayward sinner come home, by all means. But let him come home to penance, not a party. Where was the stern disapproval, the dreaded heart-to-heart with the old man? The tears of repentance, the plan for repayment? He just shows up and before he can rattle off his calculated confession, our father embraces him and it’s party time. Where is the moral justice in that? What about consequences? What kind of world would this be if we all went around rewarding sinners while the responsible, God-fearing folks are sweating it out in the fields?

Yes, I know your church thrives on its ministries to the poor and needy, the grieving and the heartbroken, and I commend you for it. But what about us who are holding our own? What about those of us who work hard to keep our jobs and stay in our marriages and take care of our health and pay our bills but never seem to get any
credit for it, while the hungry and the homeless, the poor and powerless get all the attention? What do you have to do to get a party around here? Do you have to go squander your inheritance before you can come home to be embraced, and kissed, and assured that you belong?

“Look!” I shouted at our father. “All these years I have been slaving for you, and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you’ve never given me so much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours (there, I said it!), who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

He just stared at me, and I could see the tears forming in his eyes. I wish he’d taken a swing at me or at least bawled me out for not honoring him as my father. Anything but those tears. I think he realized he could lose both his sons. He nearly lost the younger one to a life of recklessness. But he was about to lose me to something worse—to a bitter resentment that took me so far away from him I might as well be feeding pigs in a far country.

You see, I wanted my father to love me as I deserved to be loved—because I stayed put, because I followed orders, because I came to church and read my Bible and kept my nose clean: because I did the right things. I wanted him to love me for that. And what I saw in his eyes was that he does love me, but not for any of that, any more than he loved my brother for what he’d done. He doesn’t love us according to what we deserve. He just loves us—more because of who he is than because of who we are.

I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t stand a love that transcends right and wrong, that throws parties for bankrupt sinners and expects the hard-working righteous to rejoice. I couldn’t stand it. And so I stayed outside—outside my father’s house and outside my father’s love, refusing to come in.

So he came to me. He found me.

“My son,” he said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” In spite of my self-righteous pride and my hateful words, he wouldn’t let me go. He reached out his hand, inviting me into restored relationship with him, yes, but also with my brother. “We had to celebrate and be glad,” he said, “because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.”

I stood there outside the house, staring at the outstretched hand, seeing those tears, hearing the party going on inside. I stood there, and then...

And then what?

Jesus doesn’t say. He doesn’t tell us how it all turned out. He doesn’t say “...and they all lived happily ever after.” See, it’s up to us to finish the story. It’s up to those of us who share that elder brother syndrome to decide whether we’re going to stand outside all alone being right, or give up being right and go inside and take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and sinners, brothers and sisters united only
by our relationship to this loving Father – this Father who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be stopped from giving us the love we need.

Are you coming to the party? Or are you going to stay outside, angry and alone?

Do you hear it? The parable is ticking away like a time bomb. May its healing, transforming power explode in you... soon.


For further insights, see Kenneth Bailey’s excellent study of the parables entitled *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), and Henri Nouwen’s The Return of the Prodigal Son (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1992).