“The Older Brother”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Don’t we mutter, though!? Aren’t we like the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Aren’t we like the older brother way too often? I know that I have spoken about this passage at least once here, as the lectionary repeats every three years. Each time I look at it, I invite us to consider ourselves in a different place, in a different person: What is it to be the father, to be the prodigal son in this story? What is it to be the older brother? I’ve realized that I only heard sermons in my childhood particularly, and mostly about the prodigal son; what felt after a while about pretty obvious sin. I mean, if I am going to spend all my family inheritance on drinking and drugging, hanging out with the wrong crowd, with prostitutes . . . we go on and on. Add to that anything you think of as bad or sinful behavior, and I remember hearing about that pretty often. Only once do I remember hearing a message that even lightly touched on the older son. Sure, we want to be received by our earthly and heavenly parents in the way the prodigal is received by his father in the story. We live in the hope of being received by God in this way, don’t we? Yet, more often than not, I think we land directly in the place of the older brother—and not just in our families.

We heard from Corinthians, **“**So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.” We aren’t meant even to see Christ in the way we often do. Christ doesn’t grant us our wishes with a magic wand or with a magic 8-ball. Knowing Christ enables us to regard people and situations differently, because that is the way we know the reconciling power of God’s love.

Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to look at the dilemma of the father from a different perspective, and one that might well make good sense to us in the context of family, as well as in the context of church and even the larger context of world affairs. “Jesus seems to understand the man with two sons, who cannot get his family to sit down at the same table either. The younger son is so warped by his sense of unworthiness that he is prepared to eat the rest of his meals in the bunkhouse with the hired hands. The older son is so inflated by his sense of entitlement that he will not eat with anyone who has not earned a place at the table. Both sons suffer from the illusion that they can be in relationship with their father without being related to each other. What is a father to do?” What is God to do with a world in which we see nearly entire countries whose standard of living is so far below our own that we find it hard to see their people at all? Or that when we do, we are moved to pity without action? Or moved to prayer without the kind of compassion that gets us to our feet?”

I love that line, which is one of the reasons I love Barbara Brown Taylor. There are quotable quotations. That we would be moved to prayer without the kind of compassion that gets us to our feet would be a travesty, wouldn’t it? We aren’t always like that. What do we do in our immediate families? Are there ways in which we continue to be lost to each other in more intimate ways, or with more direct family bonds? For those of us who are still working, are our relationships with our employers, or employees, or co-workers situations in which generous forgiveness or compassionate understanding could better reflect what we know through Christ? Jesus leaves his parable open at the end, without our knowing the decision the older brother makes. We get to write our own endings of the story and also of our own story . . . day by day, by day.

And maybe those are the easy relationships these days. Maybe thinking of our close friends, or family, or even co-workers has us thinking, “yeah, I could do that; I could try to look at them differently. I could begin to look at them with some understanding, or forgiveness.” I think I don’t even need to mention that we are in a moment in which “sides” are so clearly marked that there is no erasing them with a word, or a joke about invisible borders. We don’t see face to face very often the ones whose positions feel intractably opposed to ours, and when we do, *we* are so certain that we are right that we can’t find the words to enter into conversation about what really matters. I have found it easy this week to consider the older brother to be someone other than myself, but Jesus always invites us to enter into a difficult place so that we may become better.

And think about this: No one even remembered to invite the older brother to the party. So, who haven’t we invited to our parties here that really needs an invitation for reconciliation to happen? Or, to whose party, to whose needs have we gone because we really *see them* with the new eyes of Christ?

We are so often asked to put ourselves in the place of either son, and there are good lessons to be learned in doing so. We are also, always, asked to love as extravagantly as the Father who loves his sons, and as our God loves us. In writing about Barbara Brown’s same essay, “The Older Brother Had a Point,” printed in *Christianity Today*, October 26, 1998, a commentator from the UCC, Kate Huey, says, “Here [Taylor] poignantly observes the ways that both sons are lost to the father, one "to a life of recklessness," and the other "to a more serious fate, to a life of angry self-righteousness that takes him so far away from his father that he might as well be feeding pigs in a far country." What Taylor does so well is to describe the love of the father who "does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them, more because of who he is than because of who they are." Sooner or later, even those of us "faithful ones," if that's indeed how we imagine ourselves, end up on that doorstep, too, struggling with our own self-righteousness: "It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside all alone being right, or give up our rights and go inside and take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels, brothers and sisters united only by our relationship to one loving father, who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be prevented from giving us the love we need."

Is there anything keeping us from giving others the love they need? Who in the story is seeing the world from a worldly point of view, one that measures out compassionate love, maybe in teaspoons? What would be the spin on this story if the characters, and we, saw it from Jesus’ point of view? What will be the spin in our lives if we live into the wideness of God’s mercy, as we will sing in a little while? Do you imagine that the older brother continues to stand outside, sulking in his sense of distorted fairness and cursing a fate over which he actually now has some control? The older brother can accept his father’s invitation to the table, to come inside. He can know that his brother is as worthy as he of a love that knows no bounds, and he can aspire to love as well. His brother was lost in so many ways and has found his way home. Now, it is the older brother’s decision whether he himself remains lost on the outside or will be wrapped as warmly in the family embrace.

Are we going to keep ourselves on the outside when we see such clear divides between our brothers and sisters in faith, in life, in this world? How might we find the understanding that there is wideness in God’s mercy that has room for all of us—sinners and saints, faithful and struggling? So, our prayer today, and I invite you to pray with me that we may we be so reconciled to God ourselves that we may see the world with Christ’s eyes, and love, and give with new and generous forgiveness., even as we strive for righteous living ourselves. Amen.