

4 Lent

March 6, 2016

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Cor 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Have you seen the TV ad for diapers that starts out with the first time mom interviewing a prospective babysitter? Mom notes the candidate's ten years of experience, the Masters in Early Childhood Development, but says, "But you have no PhD. Can I record this?" Then the scene cuts to child #2, as the mom and dad are hurrying through the front door, passing their child to the bewildered teenaged babysitter as she arrives; and the mom says, "Here's all the numbers, food's in the fridge, and Lucas like's to pull on jewelry, so you might want to lose the nose ring." The elder and younger child grow up differently. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jSHzYS9V88>

I grew up as the oldest child, with two brothers and a sister. I was expected to be the model, so I was told. In bed by 9:30 on school nights, no TV until homework was done, no allowance unless all the chores on my list were done. How much of that do you think applied to my younger brothers and sister? None. How do you think I felt, seeing how 'carefree' their life was, versus my life of responsibility, and duty, and commitment, and doing everything that would earn my parents' favor? I was not happy; not ONE LITTLE BIT. And it got worse by the time the family got to my sister, the youngest. SHE got to eat one morsel of food at a time on her dinner plate, as she watched my brothers and me clear the table around her, and wash all the dishes – just finishing her meal as we finished the dishes.

The story of the Prodigal Son is a misnomer. It really should be called the parable of the Loving Father and his Two Lost Sons. It would be a great mistake to give all the attention to the fun-loving younger son. His sins were obvious, and so was his repentance. But the older son's lost-ness was probably not so obvious until the younger son returned home.

Why was the older son upset that his father invited his brother back into the household so easily? He buckled under the pressure of needing to please. He felt resentful; it was unfair to not acknowledge his better work ethic. He was jealous, bitter, angry for attention his brother was getting. He wanted his brother treated appropriately harshly for what he had done.

Henri Nouwen: "The one who stayed home also became lost". He said, 'When this son of yours came back, you killed the fatted calf for him': This distanced the older son not just from his brother, but also from the father. He

was disconnecting from them; He could not accept the invitation into joy and celebration with his father.

The father said, “You are with me always, and all I have is yours.” There could not have been a stronger statement of the father’s unlimited love for his older son. But the elder son had built up a wall of resentment and envy.

What would have happened if the younger son came upon his older brother before meeting his father? Would he have the chance to see his father? Would he have experienced the father’s love again? Would he have been invited into the house of joy that his father had waiting for him? Not likely.

Is there some of the elder son in us? We are the ones who attend Sunday services; we are here for each other; we try to do the right thing through good and bad, through busy days and slow days, bad weather and good weather, to be here for each other; to show our commitment to each other and our love for God. We take our faith seriously.

There might some of the elder son in us, toward those who have wandered off, or others who have never experienced the Father’s love and joy; keeping them from feeling invited home. Might we want others to memorize our liturgy like we have; or volunteer at Second Harvest first; or sign a pledge card first; or in other ways act like us? Might we sometimes be like the elder son, bitter, envious, or even angry that the commitment we have doesn’t apply to everyone? If some of that is true, how can we change?

Henry Nouwen, priest and author, offers us this counsel, “Although we are incapable of liberating ourselves from our frozen anger, we can allow ourselves to be found by God and healed by his love through the concrete and daily practice of trust and gratitude. Trust and gratitude are the disciplines for the conversion of the elder son... Trust is that deep inner conviction that the Father wants us home. Gratitude goes beyond defending what is ‘mine’ and therefore not ‘(yours)’, and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift.”

Nouwen adds, “to give trust and gratitude a chance in our life requires taking a leap of faith. Needing to please – resentment – trust & gratitude - leap of faith; means loving without expecting to be loved in return; giving without wanting to receive; inviting without hoping to be invited, holding without asking to be held. Every time we make even a small leap of faith, we experience the Father, who invites us into his celebration and joy over the return of one who was lost outside the household; and of ones who might be lost from inside the household, and are reminded, “You are with me always, and all I have is yours.” May that promise live in us. Amen.