

Sunday, March 6, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Birth Order

“There was a man who had two sons...” So begins this great story from Luke’s gospel, a story that is commonly called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But this story is not just about one son, it’s about two sons, it begins: “There was a man who had two sons.” An older son, and a younger son, and what different sons they were. One stayed home, and worked, and was infuriated. One left home, and was wrecked, and was restored. What different sons. Did it have to do with their birth order?

Let’s do a little survey about birth order, to bring it a little closer to home. Raise your hand if you are an oldest child. (Keep your hands up, I want a chance to look around and see, and let others see, who among us are oldest children.) Theories of birth order say that the oldest child is responsible, reliable, and conscientious; they like taking charge and want everything to be just right, and they may struggle to admit when they are wrong. Now, raise your hand if you are a youngest child. Birth order theories say that youngest child is more carefree, easygoing, fun-loving, affectionate, and sociable. They may also be more financially irresponsible, and potentially manipulative. Only children, I hope you only children raised your hand for oldest and youngest, you get lots of attention, having some qualities of both, and some of your own. And finally, middle children, raise your hands. That’s me. As one of my siblings recently pointed out, (my older sibling pointed it out, responsibly) I often fill the role of mediator in the family. We’ll pass over our other middle children characteristics, we middle children often get passed over...

All of these birth order descriptions, are, of course, just theories, but I think there’s something to them. They do seem to fit today’s parable, with its older son, and its younger son.

The gospel story gets told out of birth order, though: we hear about the younger child first. Maybe that’s why the story often has a title that references only him, the younger, the prodigal, son. Or maybe the story often goes by his name, because what he does and what happens to him is the stuff of great stories. It goes from riches, to rags, to riches, moving along with a dramatic arc that finally ends with the Father’s announcement. What an amazing, joy drenched announcement: “This son of mine was dead, and is alive again, he was lost, and is found!” We have an amazing hymn that captures that joy, that amazing grace, that is offered to the younger son.

But of course, that’s not the end of the story, that’s just the first half. But before we get to that second part, about the other, older son, it’s worth taking a closer look at the younger son, at what happened to him and what he did. Historically and culturally, for a son to ask for his inheritance in advance, while his father is still alive, is not just out of the ordinary, it’s an affront. It’s like the son saying, “Let’s act like you’re dead, Dad. Give me what I’d get.” He’s economically and emotionally cutting off ties. And then, the younger son takes all that money and goes to a far country, far away from home; geographically cutting off ties. In that far country he burns through the cash, loses it all. We don’t know the specifics, “squandered” could cover a lot of ill-advised investments and questionable expenditures. “Dissolute living” is the delicate term used. In whatever ways, all he’s been given is gone, faster than you can fry bacon, and so this younger son, we assume this Jewish son, takes a job feeding pigs. A Jewish boy, with unclean animals. And he begins to envy the pigs their dinner. And so he starts thinking, reflecting, contemplating.

What kind of contemplating is this? Does the younger son hit rock bottom and repent? We do hear this story in the church season of Lent, a season in which we focus on repentance. Maybe that’s what’s happening here. Or maybe, in the pigsty, the younger son starts contemplating,

scheming, formulating a plan, rehearsing a speech, how can he get out of this, now? Does that change our theories about this younger son? Maybe you hear the story differently, depending upon where you are in the birth order.

Then, of course, there's the older son. Maybe we hear his story differently, too. Maybe, especially if before we get to the speech that the older son makes, if before that we note that when the reunion between father and wayward, irresponsible younger son took place, the older son was off in the fields, working, as he's been doing, responsibly, ever since the younger son took off. And then, when the younger son returns, no one tells the older son, he doesn't know that something has happened until he hears the music and dancing, until he sees that a party is in full force, back at home, after his long day at work, and so, confused, he asks one of the servants, "What's going on?"

Does that change our theories about this older son?

But then what about what the older son does next? Hearing the news of the younger son's return, the older son becomes infuriated! Refuses to go in to the impromptu reunion party. His father comes out and pleads with him, but the older son spews self-righteous indignation and makes spurious claims. Listen to how he talks his father. That's what he says, to his father, "Listen!" This from the son who claims he's been obedient, respectful? "Listen, I've been working like a slave for you, (Is that how it is, being a son?) and I have never disobeyed your command!" (Never? Really?) and "You have never given me even a young goat!" (Not even a goat!) But when this son of yours (Not "my brother," this "son of yours") "when this son of yours came back, who devoured your property with prostitutes" (The younger son spent his inheritance on prostitutes? How does the older son know that? We don't even know that, and he hasn't even seen his brother yet. All we know is that the younger son was lost, lost in dissolute living, which ended in the mud, in the sludge, in the dank and the dark, alone. All we know is that he lost it all, far from family, far from home, in a far country.

And now here's the older son, standing outside the family home, outside of the party, outside of the lights and the laughter and the music and the dancing. The older son is standing outside of that, standing alone in the dank and the dark, alone in his resentment and fury. The older son is standing just outside the door, but he is just as surely in a far country. Surely what he is doing, too, is dissolute living.

"Come in," his father says, to his older son. "Come home. It's all yours, too. It's always been yours." What a great story this is, this second part of the parable, which also ends with the Father's amazing announcement: "It's all, always, been yours. Come rejoice with me. Rejoice with me, because 'this brother of yours'—that's what the father says, to his older son, he doesn't call the younger son the prodigal son, he refers to him as "this brother of yours," "this brother of yours was dead, and has come to life, was lost, and has been found." "Come home," the father says to his older son, "Come in and see your brother. Hug him, dance, celebrate." That joy, that amazing grace of which we sing, is offered to the older son, too. Does he go in? Does he come home? We don't know. That's where the story ends, with us wondering, will he go in?

You may controvert theories of birth order. You may be an older child with a wild streak, a younger child who is conscientious, a middle child bad at compromise, an only child who says just get over all this attention. However you mix up the order, however mixed up you may be, however mixed your motives or mean spirited we are, the Father's love is offered, to all children, to you and to me, and we are left with the question, will we come home?