

Fourth Sunday of Lent—Year C

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Luke 15—the **story of the prodigal son**. We know this story so well. **YOUNGER SON/BROTHER** who gets his share of the inheritance and heads out to have a good ol' time until it's not such a good ol' time; the **OLDER SON/BROTHER** who has never left the farm; and the **FATHER** who loves *both* of his sons.

This is an **archetypal story** if ever there was one, so let's play with this a bit.

Who in here identifies with the **YOUNGER SON/BROTHER**?

Who identifies with the **OLDER SON/BROTHER**?

Who identifies with the **FATHER**?

Who identifies with *more than one* of these roles?

So, those of you who identify as the **YOUNGER SON/BROTHER**, give me some adjectives to describe who you are:

- adventurous
- curious
- spirited
- embarrassed
- humbled
- full of shame

And those of you who identify as the **OLDER SON/BROTHER**, how about some adjectives to describe yourself:

- dutiful
- loyal
- hard-working
- resentful
- unappreciated
- angry
- disappointed
- shame (when father confronts him)

Now then, you **YOUNGER SONS**, *how do you perceive your older brother*:

- resentful
- rigid
- spiteful

- obligated
- duty-bound
- scorekeeper
- jealous
- entitled
- unhappy

How about your dad, how do you perceive him:

- way too forgiving
- compassionate in ways I don't deserve

And you **OLDER SONS**, *how do you perceive your younger brother:*

- lazy
- wasteful
- irresponsible
- entitled
- restless
- careless
- selfish
- Dad's undeserving favorite

And how do you perceive your dad:

- totally unfair
- foolish
- naïve

And you **FATHER'S** in the story, how do you describe yourself:

- heartbroken
- grieving
- tortured
- relieved
- hurt
- frustrated
- yearning
- torn
- conflicted

Each one of these characters elicits **A LOT of feelings**—that's why it's such an effective story for **Jesus** to tell. He knows this is **going to get to everyone who is listening** one way or the other. And in a very real sense, it's a story about **desire** and *misguided desire*.

The **YOUNGER SON** is *searching, longing for something*—*more adventure, more life*—he's **restless**, and he's got to **get out there** and **fill that hunger in his soul**. Except **the path he chose**, and the **shiny objects** he ran across, left him feeling **hungrier** than ever. And fully in

touch with the **grumbings in his belly—and remember that hunger manifests in all kinds of ways in our bodies and souls and psyches and hearts**—fully in touch with that **hunger**, he **knew he had to head for home**.

“There is a longing in our hearts,” goes that song we sing—that’s **desire** at its most basic, but we set about **fulfilling that desire in all kinds of misguided ways**. And *eventually, if we’re lucky*, our **misguided attempts will take us to that really uncomfortable place where we have to wake up** to what’s happening and **set our hearts for home**.

When this happens, our heart is **first blown open** by our **need to turn for home**, but that’s **nothing compared to how our hearts get blown open** when we **collapse into the arms of the forgiveness and compassion and love that run to greet us while we are still a long way off**. We feel we **don’t deserve such compassion**, and certainly **don’t feel worthy of the ring and the robe and the feast prepared in our honor**. **Nothing can slay us like unconditional love that rejoices just because we live and breathe**.

But the **OLDER SON** is **searching too—mostly for some sign from the father that he’s done a good job**. His **desire to know the father’s delight is a good one**, but it gets **misguided** when he **believes he’s already earned it**, and his reaction reveals his **underlying belief that he thought he had to earn his father’s love in the first place**.

His **hard work and actions don’t spring from a place of love and offering, but from a place of fear**. His **longing for his father’s approval made it really hard to feel the father’s love which he already had**. The truth is **this son was already home, but he couldn’t experience it for the weight and burden of duty and obligation and resentment that he carried**.

And the **FATHER**—he **only longs for his sons to be home—to come home and to know home**. He **doesn’t care about how far and lost you’ve been; he doesn’t care how bound up in duty you are—he just wants you to know home and to celebrate the joy and wonder and love that binds us together beyond our perceptions of worthiness. Period**.

It is so easy to **wander around in this archetypal story that we forget that Jesus is telling this story to an audience—to the tax collectors and sinners who are drawing near to listen to him and to the Pharisees and scribes that just can’t stand the fact that Jesus welcomes the likes of tax collectors and sinners and eats with them**.

There has been this **commercial** running throughout **March Madness** that says at the end, **“Jesus welcomed all to the table. He gets us. All of us.”**

That’s the point Jesus is making here. He gets the **YOUNGER SONS**, the **tax collectors, the sinners, who just want a place to call home**. He gets the **OLDER SONS**, the **Pharisees, the scribes, who are so concerned with earning their rightful worth that they miss the joy of being loved**. He gets the **FATHERS** who **never stop longing for sons to come home and sons to join in celebrations and sons to reconcile themselves to the love that is bigger than our judgments of ourselves or one another**.

Jesus welcomes *all of us to the table*, but he won't coerce us to join him there—he loves us too much for that. That's why the story ends **without knowing if the OLDER SON will join the feast or not.**

But God is the eternal Father who is always standing on the front porch with eyes set on the horizon scanning for the lost *who are still a long way off* and reasoning with the stubborn and resentful to soften their heart, *not just for the sake of their brother but for their own heart's sake as well.*

Today, where are YOU in this story?

Jesus is welcoming all of us to the feast...*What's keeping you from putting on the ring and the robe? What's keeping you out working long hours in the field while the music is playing and the party is on? For whom are you scanning the horizon; who in your life is trying to find their way home? Whose heart are you pleading with to soften so they can let the love in that's been flowing toward them always?*

***“Jesus gets us. All of us.”* If we'll let him. Amen.**

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