

“Alone Near the Father’s Heart”—Luke 15:25-32

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

A Sunday School teacher was sharing this parable of the Prodigal Son one day with a class of children, and by way of review she asked, “Johnny, when the prodigal son came home, who was unhappy?” And Johnny said, “The fatted calf!”

Well, Johnny was right, in a sense. I wouldn’t have wanted to have been in the cattle pen that day. Would you? But we know who was really unhappy, don’t we?

The older son was dragging his weary bones back to the house after yet another hard day in the fields—a day just like so many others he had put in over the years of tending the farm. But as he approached the house he could hear the driving bass of party music. It wasn’t his father’s kind of music—what could be going on? As he drew closer, he could hear the sounds of people dancing and singing and movin’ with the groovin’. He could hear glasses clinking and people talking and laughing. And he could see one of the servants turning a most unhappy calf on a spit over an open fire, while another servant continuously brushed on the secret recipe barbecue sauce.

He called the servant with the barbecue sauce over to him and asked, “What’s going on?”

“Why, sir,” the servant said, “it’s a party!”

“A party!? A party!?” the older son said. “Why wasn’t I informed?”

“Well, sir,” the servant said, as he began to shift uncomfortably from one foot to another, “it was kind of a spur of the moment thing, and we hadn’t had the chance to come to the fields and get you.”

“What do you mean?” the older son demanded.

“Well, sir,” the servant said, as he began to chew nervously on his lower lip, “your brother has come home, and your father’s giving him a barbecue.”

“My *who* has come home?” the older son said.

“Your brother, sir,” the servant said, trying to smile while he was sweating profusely. “He’s come back home, and your father has given him the best robe, a ring for his finger, shoes for his feet, and this barbecue. But don’t worry, sir. The party’s just getting started, and if you want to get cleaned up and changed, there will still be plenty to eat and drink. This looks like it’s going to be the best party ever!”

The older son pushed the servant aside and went to the patio. But instead of going through the sliding door, he just stood there with his arms folded across his chest, glaring through the window. If the anger in his heart could have been translated into beams of energy shot from his eyes, they would have shattered the glass and toasted everyone inside.

People began to notice the man on the patio, standing there as still and as stern as a statue. And finally, the father caught a glimpse of him, too. Excusing himself from the man to whom he was talking, the father sighed and shook his head ever so slightly, then he took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and stepped out onto the patio.

“Son, won’t you come into the party?” the father asked.

“No,” the older son said quietly—but if looks could kill, the son would have gotten life imprisonment.

“Please, son,” the father said. “Come in, have something to eat and drink, and join the party.”

“Listen!” the son hissed at his father. “Every day for years and years I have gone out into the fields to work this farm. I have never once complained about anything you’ve asked me to do. I’ve stayed home. I’ve been faithful. I’ve been loyal. I’ve been a good son. But did you ever give me a party? No! But then this son of yours [notice that the older son doesn’t say, “My brother”]—this *person*—squanders a third of what you’re worth, and when he comes home you give him a robe and a ring and shoes and a barbecue! It just isn’t fair!”

And he’s right, isn’t he? It isn’t fair. One deserves a party and doesn’t get it; the other doesn’t deserve a party but gets it anyhow. It goes against the way we tend to operate. The one who works hard, the one who is faithful and loyal and steadfast—he’s the one who deserves the party. The one who runs off and squanders his money deserves a boot in the backside and a stern “I told you so!” The older son is right—it isn’t fair!

But what this older son doesn’t understand—and what we *need* to understand—is that his father’s love isn’t based on what one deserves and the other doesn’t. It isn’t about rewarding the good, faithful son and punishing the prodigal. Nor is it about honoring the prodigal to spite the good and faithful son, for the father loves them *both*—not because of what they’ve done or haven’t done, but

simply because they are *his sons*. As he tells his older son, “You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” The father has always been ready to give his older son the robe and the ring and the shoes and the barbecue—not because he deserves it, but simply because the older boy is his son. The older son cannot rejoice at his brother’s homecoming, nor can he even rejoice at being his father’s son, because he doesn’t know his father’s heart. For all this time, he’s been physically close to his father, but he’s been alone—alone near the father’s heart. For what he doesn’t get is that the father’s heart is filled with grace—unearned, undeserved love.

Can I tell you the story of another older brother?

The man I’m thinking about was an ordained minister who was sincerely trying to lead a life pleasing to God. He kept a very strict devotional discipline. He tried to do all the good he could, and he tried to lead others to do the same. No matter what he did, however, he just didn’t feel like God really loved him. He even decided he would go to a foreign land and serve as a missionary—surely, that would be enough to please God! But he came home from his endeavors a broken man, both spiritually and emotionally, bereft of faith and ready to give up his ministry.

But this man discovered what the prodigal’s brother did not—at least as far as the parable tells us. In a meeting one evening (a meeting he really didn’t want to go to), while someone was reading about the transformation God works in people’s lives, this man came to know in his heart of hearts that he’d been going about things all wrong. He came to realize that he couldn’t earn God’s love, nor was it something he deserved. He realized God’s love was gift, freely given, and that all he could do was accept it. And from that moment on, he not only rejoiced at the love of God that now filled his heart, but he made it his mission to tell everyone who would listen that the love of God that saves people from sin and spiritual death and that changes their lives was free for the asking.

Those of you who know your Methodist history have probably already guessed that I’ve been talking about John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement—and for the last 281 years Methodists have joined other Christians in sharing all over the world this good news about the free gift of God’s love—the gift we call grace.

Grace is what we’re all about—grace that leads us to recognize that we live in a broken relationship with God and leads us to the desire to make a change; grace that makes us right with God and gives us a new start; and grace that helps us to grow into the people God wants us to be. But, as the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes, there is no new thing under the sun—Methodists didn’t come up with the idea of grace. For twenty centuries the Church of Jesus Christ has taught and

preached that our salvation is by grace—by the undeserved, unearned love of God which has been shown us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For twenty centuries the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ has preached and taught that the only way we can know the love of God is simply by accepting it—for we can't do enough good works or be good enough to earn or deserve the love of God. That's the good news which, as one of the creeds puts it by quoting Scripture, "we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved."

Now, you would think that this good news—the word of grace—would fill every Christian heart with joy and peace and love. You would think that this wondrous love of God for us prodigals would create among us communities filled with gratitude and hope, communities where we can become all God calls us to be, communities that serve as bases from which we go out and share this free gift of God with others. You would think that the hope and joy and peace of knowing God's love would be so visible and contagious that the whole world would be infected with it!

So it amazes me that there are so many hearts and lives that claim to belong to Jesus, yet there is no joy or peace, no hope or gratitude in them. It amazes me that there are so many so-called communities of faith that claim to be rooted in the love of God, yet there is within them more discouragement, anger, and outright hatred than encouragement, love, and peace. It amazes me that there are so many Christians and so many churches for whom the whole idea of reaching out to their communities with this good news is utterly repugnant—I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, "Well, they know where the church is, and they know they ought to be here." But it wouldn't have mattered to them anyway, because they wouldn't have wanted "those people" (whoever "those people" may be) in their church anyhow.

Could it be that there are so many hearts and lives that are alone near the Father's heart? Could it be that there are so many hearts and lives who think they know the Father's heart, yet they don't really know it at all? Could it be that there are so many hearts and lives who believe that the Father *owes* them—that because they've behaved themselves (remembering, of course, that they're only human and nobody's perfect), they've done a few good works, and tried to live a good life, the Father's just *got* to reward them? Could it be that there are so many hearts and lives that say to others, "I've earned mine—now you earn yours!" Could it be that a lot of us who claim the name of Christ are like that older brother—unable to enjoy or even understand the Father's love?

Listen! Whether we are prodigals or older sons and daughters, whether we're sinners or saints (at least in our own estimation), there's one great fact of faith. God doesn't deal with us as we deserve. For what we deserve is condemnation—our sin, our fundamental rebellion against God and God's will and

God's way, separates us from the holy and righteous God. There's nothing we can do to repair the breach. But God in his love for us has made the way by giving his Son to stand in the gap for us. And all we can do is accept this gift—we can't earn it, and we don't deserve it. We can only accept it. And I believe that if our hearts have been filled with the Father's love, we'll show it with lives marked by hope and joy and gratitude, lives marked by peace and love, lives marked by encouraging others and sharing the Father's love with those who need to know it.

Isn't amazing how close you can be to someone and still not know him or her? So many people claim to be close to our Father in heaven, but they don't really know him at all. They are alone—alone near the Father's heart. But when God's grace—when God's unearned, undeserved love and forgiveness and transformation—has filled your life, the peace and joy, the hope, gratitude, and joy that mark his people will let you know that you'll never have to be alone near the Father's heart. Thanks be to God!