

“Presbyterian Older Brothers”  
(sermon given 3/14/10 by Scott Jansen)  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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[Prayer for Illumination] Gracious and merciful God, we are not worthy of your love, yet we ask for your blessing nonetheless. Help us to hear Your Word, through Jesus Christ our Lord..... Amen.

This morning’s parable is from Luke’s gospel. Listen now for God's word for you.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So... he told them this parable:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.....

But when he **came to himself** he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on

his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.....

"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.'

Amen.

So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

This parable explores the tension between justice and mercy—what one has earned, vs. what one needs....

When you bring home your firstborn child from the hospital, you never consider what your child has earned—you only rejoice in being able to give her whatever you are able to give. Mercy triumphs over justice. Otherwise, no one would survive one's first week. Everyone here is alive today only because someone chose to give you mercy rather than justice. Mercy is necessary for life.

But what if your child were abused by a priest while singing in some German choir? Would you be screaming for mercy..., or for justice???? Judging by recent polls in Germany, I'd say most would be screaming for justice. So, when is it right to seek justice, and when should we show mercy????????????

Instead of answering, let me tell you a story—a true story. Once upon a time, there was a girl named Sophie who was the daughter of a Presbyterian pastor. She had to go to church every Sunday. And, when she was young, this wasn't a problem because she thought

church was fun—there were lots of different snacks and toys and things to do. It was better to go to church than to sit at home and watch boring cartoons. Besides, it made her parents happy to show her off, and when she was a little girl, she liked to make her parents happy....

But then Sophie got a little older, went to middle school, and some of her friends started doing other things on Sunday mornings. And little by little, she began to resent the fact that she had to go to church. And that trend only got worse as she went through high school, when her friends started to make fun of her for going to church. She only wanted to be with the trendy crowd. Gone were the days when she rejoiced in making her parents happy. She wanted to be popular among kids her own age....

When Sophie went to college, she told her parents she just wanted them to pay her tuition, but, otherwise, leave her alone. She was being responsible, selecting pre-law as her major. They had no need to worry about her future, so she wanted their money, but not their advice. She was going to get out from under her parents' thumbs and re-make herself into someone more... cosmopolitan. So..., convinced that her unhappiness stemmed from following the ways of the church, she stopped attending worship, and she started seeking ways of doing whatever her Sunday School teachers had taught her not to do. Sophie didn't realize at the time that when you define yourself as a person who is rebelling against X, you still are letting X determine who you are....

So, Sophie started to dabble in some substance abuse, and she was rewarded with increased popularity, which led to more boyfriends, which led to more substance abuse, which led to more popularity. It all worked really well as long as she was in college and her parents were paying all the bills. But after four years, she hadn't quite finished enough coursework for her degree, and her parents were starting to worry about her future. She needed another year in college to finish up—just one more year.

They hadn't planned on that extra tuition bill. So, Sophie said, give me my share of the inheritance now and you won't have to worry about me ever again.....

Sophie got her fifth year tuition bill paid, but did not get accepted into law school. Her grades and test scores weren't quite up to par. So, she took a job as a clerk, and continued to party with the

cool crowd—those who went back to all the old college reunion events.

A few years went by. Sophie got a couple of DUI's on her record and forgot about the dream of becoming a lawyer. She took up with a man who seemed to really love her. He certainly made her happy, that is, until she got pregnant, and then he did a quick vanishing act.

Actually, all of her friends started to fall away at that point. And being a single mom was tough for Sophie, especially since she was estranged from her parents. But Sophie was tough-minded and figured she didn't need friends—she could make it on her own. Gone were the days when she cared about what was trendy or what her friends thought. Now she was going to live to make her self happy.

Oh, but then there was her son to consider. She might have been able to face life alone, but when it came to her son, she sometimes felt that she needed a little help—help with watching him, help with raising him, help with teaching him how to be human. But, no one gave her anything.....

One day she was rushing home from work to relieve the babysitter when she heard the chimes from the Presbyterian Church down the road from her apartment. And she came to herself..... She thought about how she longed to hear words of grace, words of acceptance, words of mercy, words of love. Oh, but she had burned that bridge long ago. Surely it was too late for her. She had received the letter years earlier from the old Session—“removed from the inactive roll.”.... But maybe she could just sit in the sanctuary one Sunday, just to hear the words. Not to become a member—she figured they wouldn't have her. She just wanted to hear the words.

This was not her parents' church, mind you. She had moved far away from there. This was just some strange unknown big imposing church.... Well, she decided to give it a try—she and her son—just to see if mercy truly did exist....

And Sophie was knocked off her feet at how welcoming they were. Within a couple of months they had put a choir robe on her, they were providing childcare for her son whenever she was at church functions, and they made a big chocolate cake to welcome her with her new member class. She even reconciled with her parents who were in a distant retirement home by then.

Her new church gave her an anchor. She had tried living to make her parents happy, tried living to make her friends happy, tried

living to make her self happy, but now she had truly come to herself—her real self.... Her deepest identity was as a child of God, a member of God's family. That was where she belonged.

But, her journey of faith wasn't over quite yet. There was still more to learn. She was surprised by how welcoming the church was, by how accepting they were of her—warts and all. The church told her each week that her sins were forgiven, and she started to believe it. She eventually became an elder in the church, and saw herself as a contributing, honorable part of the body. Maybe her sins weren't so bad after all. She hadn't killed anyone. Maybe she had been too hard on herself. Maybe she wasn't really that much of a sinner....

Then she went to a Presbytery meeting, where they were talking about who can be ordained and who cannot. Really bad sinners should not be ordained, of course..., but which sins were the really bad sins? Sophie figured that, since she was ordained, her sins couldn't be all that bad—her lack of love toward her parents, drug abuse, greed, sex outside of marriage, selfishness. Those things were all forgivable, so there must be some other sins that are worse. Well, some of the folks at Presbytery suggested that the really bad sin is homosexuality—that's a worse sin than all the other sins, so anyone who is guilty of that sin should not be ordained.

Sophie listened to the arguments. There had to be something that was a really bad sin, and that was one that she had never done, so maybe that was it. So, Sophie voted to ban anyone who was homosexual from ordination, and she felt good about herself, that she wasn't such a big sinner after all.

She was proud of herself. Proud that she had reconciled with her parents, proud that she had reconciled with the church, proud to be an elder who worked hard....

But her world came crashing down once again when she discovered that her own son was gay. How could that be? She certainly never taught him those values. The son whom she loved, who had helped her find God again, was now put into the category of "biggest sinner".??.?.? And what should she do? Justice or mercy?

Sophie did not make a rational decision between the options—she acted out of love. Emotion trumped reason, and Sophie opted for mercy. But then she started to wonder. Can justice be for other peoples' sins, but mercy only for your own sins, and the sins of those whom you love? Was she supposed to say that a bad sin is a sin that

somebody else does, while a not-so-bad sin is something that I do, or something done by someone whom I love??????

Well, I said this was a true story—true in the Biblical sense of truth—meaning reflecting something crucially important.

Presbyterians are usually more like the older brother in Jesus' parable. We don't see ourselves as particularly sinful. We work hard and consider ourselves mostly good. And we can sometimes resent mercy when it is shown to someone else—whether that someone else is homosexual; or too poor to afford healthcare; or an illegal immigrant; or anyone whose sin is different from our own sin.

But if no one can survive one week on this earth without mercy, why should we feel such resentment when mercy is shown to someone else??? The older brother in the parable says to the father, I have been working like a slave for you all these years, and I never even had a little party with my close friends.... Perhaps he feels resentment because he feels like a slave—or he feels like he is only loved as long as he keeps on producing. Why doesn't he just go ahead and have a little party with his friends????

The father tells him everything he has is his. Maybe we would feel more love in our hearts towards others... if we allowed God's love for us to soak in a little more thoroughly. Do we really believe that our sins are forgiven? Do we really feel that God loves us in spite of all that we've done in the past?

Now, don't get me wrong—Jesus is not tossing justice out the window with this parable. Notice the younger brother doesn't have a share in the inheritance any longer, since all that the father now has belongs to the older brother. But nonetheless, which does Jesus consider to be the more serious sin—the younger brother's use of prostitutes, or the older brother's lack of love for his own brother????????

If you relate to the younger brother, the message of the parable is, come back to yourself, and know that God loves you..... And if you relate to the older brother, the message is... live a little, don't push yourself so hard to earn God's love, be more confident in knowing that God already loves you. Actually, it reduces to the same ultimate message in either case—you find yourself when you know that God loves you.

Amen.