

SERMON
March 18, 2007
4 Lent C
“The prodigal father”

I wonder which of the two brothers
in the Gospel story you identify with the most.
It’s a familiar parable.
Most of have heard it many times.

The younger brother says to his father,
“Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me
after you’re gone.”

The younger brother is a free spirit.
He’s had enough of the farm and he wants to get away
and live the way he wants to.

It must be difficult to live on a family farm
where everybody expects you to do things like they’ve always been done.
And if the elder brother is as rigid and controlling
as he sounds in the parable,
I can see why the younger brother wants to get away.

He wants his freedom.
I can relate to that.
When I was young, I wanted to get away and be free, too.

The older brother, on the other hand, is more of the responsible type.
He does what he’s been taught to do.
He works hard and he doesn’t complain,
even if he’s not happy about things.

He knows that a farm does not run on good intentions.

Somebody's got to make sure things get done,
and that's the older brother.

I imagine his personality is such that he wants to please his father,
and he's a dutiful son.

I recognize that in myself as well,
especially as I get older.

So if the younger brother represents freedom,
and the older brother represents responsibility,
which one would you relate to more?

I expect that we'd all relate to both the brothers to some extent.

We all have a part of us that is fun-loving and free;
we all have a part of us that wants to kick up our heels
and forget about all the responsibility.

But we also have a part of us that knows
that we should be responsible adults.

We've learned, over the course of our lives,
to show up at work on time, to pay the bills,
to be responsible adults.

So I think we all have both an element of the older brother in us
as well as the younger brother.

In the story, the younger brother, of course, gets into trouble.

He runs out of money and he has to hire himself out
to a farmer in the land where he's living
and he finds himself in a bad way.

There's a famine in the land,
and he has no food for himself
and he's so hungry he'd gladly eat the slops he's feeding to the pigs.

The story says that "he came to himself,"
which I think is a wonderful phrase.
Sitting there with the pigs, out of money and out of food,
he remembers who he is.
He's the son of his father.

And he says to himself,
"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.'"

That's the moment of repentance, the moment of change.
In that moment he opens himself to new possibilities.

When he gets near his home,
his father sees him while he is still far off,
and he rushes out to meet him.

He throws his arms around him and kisses him
and orders a feast to be given for his returned son.
"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!"

Meanwhile the older brother comes in from a long hard day in the fields
and he hears the music.

Immediately he's suspicious.

He doesn't go into the party,
but he calls to a servant and asks him,
"What's with the music?"

When he finds out, he's furious.

All the resentment he's been harboring inside for so long
suddenly boils over, and he refuses to go in.

His father hears about it, and he comes out to him.

"Listen!" he says. "All these years I've been working like a slave for you,
and I've never disobeyed your command;
yet you've 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!"

I know he doesn't come off very well in the story.

The older brother sounds spiteful and angry and jealous.

But I can relate to him.

I can imagine I might feel the same way

if someone threatened to take away my social security income
or the title to my house,

which is the way he sees it, I think.

“I earned that. I deserve it.

And if he thinks he can just waltz in here
and act like he owns half the place,
he can just forget it.”

The younger brother represents freedom.

The older brother represents responsibility.

We all have some of the younger brother
and some of the older brother in us.

It’s pretty hard for us to get our internal older brother
to embrace our internal younger brother.

Most of have some internal resentments
buried deep inside us that we don’t let anyone know about.

But when they come out, look out!

Our older brother is on the rampage.

And most of us have an irresponsible, lazy, carefree side of us
that we usually keep fairly well under wraps.

The side of us that wants to just let it all hang out
and tell it like it is.

But we usually manage

to keep our younger brother fairly well under control, too.

The parable of the prodigal son is really about the father.

In fact I think the story really should be called
the parable of the prodigal father.

It’s the father who is prodigal enough

to give half his life earnings to his freedom-loving son.

And it's the father who is prodigal enough
to receive his bankrupt son back into his arms.
It's really a story of a prodigal father.

I'm sure that was Jesus' point to the Pharisees he was speaking to.
The Pharisees were grumbling about Jesus welcoming sinners,
so I'm sure that Jesus told them this story
to tell them that God is like the prodigal father.

God welcomes us into his embrace.
The Pharisees couldn't welcome sinners,
but God welcomes us.

So Jesus was saying to the Pharisees,
if God welcomes sinners, why can't you?
Why do you have to be so hard-hearted,
when God himself is so prodigal?

I suspect that the reason
it was hard for the Pharisees to welcome sinners
was because they'd never welcomed their own inner young brother.

The Pharisees were so responsible and so proper and so righteous
that they'd never even thought about
embracing their own inner need for freedom and celebration.

I think the same thing is true for us.
We all have a freedom-loving younger brother inside us,
and we all have a responsible older brother inside.
We have parts of ourselves that we may not like very much.

Maybe we can just keep it all buried inside.

But I suspect that if we are ever going to become like the prodigal father,

then we'll have to find a way

to recognize our own inner selves

and come to terms with our own limitations.

We'll have to find a way to welcome all of ourselves.

God has already welcomed us.

God has run to meet us and thrown his arms around us

and welcomed us home.

Our job now is to welcome our selves

and welcome others as God has welcomed us.