

*The 'Plight' of the Righteous*  
Luke 15:11-32  
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The outing was a rarity in our teenaged lives as we pretty much never got to go somewhere off the campus of our small Catholic high school during school hours. At least, we never got to go anywhere without adult supervision. Yet, there we were. There were about eight of us – boys and girls, the girls all in our gray wool blazers and plaid, pleated skirts. We took the crosstown bus headed to an afternoon workshop at another school. Because we had left plenty of time and the bus had come fairly quickly, we arrived in the area of the other school with about 30 minutes to spare. Some among us suggested we do some window shopping in the near-by downtown. Some among us, worried about the fact that we had been told to go directly to the other school. What if we got caught? What would the teachers/nuns think of us? Would we be seen as untrustworthy? It might not surprise you to know that I was among the worried. In childhood – and we might say ever since – I have always been the proverbial “good little girl.” I was Hermione long before the Harry Potter books were written. Good little girls (and good little boys) are often worriers. They are usually very concerned about the rules and doing the right thing. Correspondingly, they strive always to please authority figures and have a horror of being found wanting when it comes to being proper.

Our text this morning is the all too familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. This story, which appears only in Luke, was told by Jesus in response to criticism that the Pharisees lobbed at him. The Pharisees were a sect in Judaism of that day – a sect which placed high emphasis on following the Jewish Law. They were good, faithful men, but had too much religiosity and too little love. Jesus, on the other hand, operated from a place of love bending or re-interpreting the Law as love demanded. In this text, the Pharisees have rebuked Jesus for eating with those considered sinners. Jesus’ response is to tell them a story. When we think of this tale as the story of the Prodigal Son, we lose much of what Jesus was saying. Traditionally the focus on the Prodigal or younger son has led to use of the story as a lesson in repentance. So, the preacher would point out that son’s sins, note that he came back to his father, suggest that the father represents God who is loving and merciful, admonish everyone to repent, and call it a Sunday. While that standard interpretation does have some validity – it simply turns Jesus’ rich story into another narrow lesson of repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus tells us that the younger son asked his father for his share of the inheritance, which is insulting to say the least. By Jewish law the older son is entitled to a double portion, which means that the younger son is slated to get one third of the estate upon his father’s death. But his father is not dead. The younger son asking his still living father for his share was disrespectful. Still, Dad gave his son his due. Most of us know the story – the son went to a foreign land. We are told that he squandered his inheritance in “dissolute living,” but not exactly what that means. Broke and without family help, the son ended up feeding the pigs, which tells us that he had settled in a gentile land. Jews considered pigs unclean and did not keep them. So desperate did he become that he began to wish that he could eat the slop he was feeding to those pigs. Then, Jesus tells us, he came to himself. His eyes were opened not by regret for what he had done, but

by simple human need. He was hungry and homeless and no one in this strange land gave a fig about him. Realizing that his father's servants were in a better situation than he currently was, he resolved to return home and ask to be taken in as a servant. Certainly in that there is some recognition that he had burned his bridges. A speech at the ready he approached the family land.

Dad saw him "from far off" and did the unthinkable for an adult landowner in that culture. He ran pell-mell down the road robes flying, sandals flapping to greet his returning son. Did you catch the moment of intense joy – probably still out of breath, Dad hugs and kisses his son, and calls for a robe and a ring and sandals to be put on his son, "...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!" Whatever resentment or sorrow this father may have had when his son made his request and left, his love for his son and joy at his return now overshadow everything else.

There are, of course, two sons. Older son, who was born to the privilege of inheriting a double portion of the estate, never left. Will he rejoice that his younger brother has returned? Not hardly! When he heard the good news, he became angry and resentful. He publically shamed his father by refusing to join the celebration to which the whole town was invited. He gave his father an earful, "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!" Angry. Resentful. Bitter.

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.'"

We have the story. Now we have two questions to consider: Which brother are you most like? Which brother would you like to be? Many of us, me included, readily identify with the older brother. We are the rule followers, the dutiful sons and daughters, the good students, and faithful employees. We get our dander up when we see people break rules which we feel honor-bound to obey. We seldom break rules because the guilt and fear of being found out are too much. We want those who do not follow the rules, whether rules of the road or civil laws or God's commands, to get what we think they deserve. As we listen to the story, we identify with that older brother. We can certainly feel in our guts that it's not fair! We could likely get a good froth up recounting how good he has been and how unfair Dad is being in rewarding that ne'er-do-well brother of his. It's not fair! Many of us are most like that older son.

The answer to the second question might not be as simple as it seems. Which brother would you like to be – the ne'er-do-well or the good, obedient son? The younger son was born to a position of disadvantage in that culture simply because he was born second. He would get only ½ of what his brother got; he would not get the family homestead, but would have to go out to make his own way in the world. So, he decided to get on with it. Sure, he made some poor choices. His first outing into the world was not a success – he squandered his money. He did get himself a job, but that did not go well. Yet he was then self-reflective enough to see his own situation; he was enough of a realist to recognize that he needed a new direction. He formed a

plan – not one based upon entitlement, but one based upon humility and practical need. Then he implemented his plan returning home. At that point he assumed that he deserved nothing, he knew that the village would certainly look down upon him for what he had done to his father. When his father responded with joy and love, he embraced that new reality. Though he made a small stab at his speech, he accepted his father’s love and mercy when it was freely given.

Now, let’s consider his brother. It is clear that though he stayed and worked the family land, he did so not out of love or joy or even a family bond so much out of a sense of duty – and he resented it. He saw himself as working like a slave for his father. Though he was born into the privileged position of the first born, he makes the mistake of assuming that he earns what he is to get by being the good, hardworking son. In his mind he is not privileged by birth position, but entitled through his own actions. We could say that he is angry and bitter because his father is loving and merciful to his brother, but in reality his words show that he has been angry, bitter, and resentful all along.

So, which one would you like to be? The one who made some bad choices and suffered the consequences, but was ultimately able to see his own situation, make corrections, own his errors, humble himself, and end up embraced by a merciful and loving father? Or, would you like to be the duty-bound one who kept all the rules, worked hard day-after-day resenting it all the while? The one who believed that the gift he would get was actually something he earned; the one who believed that love is deserved rather than a gift freely given? The one whom Jesus leaves angry, undecided and on the outside at the end of his story?

I tell you, sisters and brothers, sign me up to be that prodigal. For me, as the eternal good little girl, that would be some leap, but it is clear that the path to God’s love and mercy is not found in eternal vigilance about rules. Now, I am not suggesting that any of us go off and waste the family fortune or sink into dissolute living (whatever that means). What we might do, though, is consider the plight of the older brother types among us. When we are rule bound, good citizen, good student types, we often make the mistake of assuming that our personal worth is tied to what we do. We think of ourselves as the ‘good people.’ Good becomes a matter of always doing the right thing – pleasing authority figures in our lives and pleasing God by how we behave. Although as Presbyterians we give a nod to the Apostle Paul’s statement that we are ‘saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ,’ we don’t really trust that. We do not live as if that is true. Presbyterian or not we generally are trying to earn our way to heaven by being good-enough. That’s why stories like this one can make us crazy. We don’t know what to do with it when Jesus suggests that the love and mercy of God are open even to those others whom we would not identify as the ‘good people.’ I have a running debate with a friend of mine – a fellow good-little-girl. It makes her crazy that some of those other people who haven’t spent their whole lives making the effort to get to church on Sunday morning or who aren’t so very much trying to follow all the rules might also be present in God’s kingdom. Then, ‘why be good,’ she asks in dismay. She’s making all this effort – where is the pay-off? Where, indeed, is the payoff? Should we just all say, “What the heck, eat, drink and be merry” and sink into dissolute living? Doesn’t God care if we are good?

Of course God cares if we are good; God gave us commandments, not suggestions, but commandments, as rules for life. It is not in following the rules that we get off track. It is in how we understand the relationship between our obedience and God's love that we get confused. When we fall into the trap of thinking that we are the 'good people' or even that we are trying to be the 'good people,' we lose track of that fact that we are all sinners. While that is not a good thing, we also remember that Jesus said that he had come to call not the righteous, but sinners. Human nature is to sin. Those who see themselves as the righteous fail to understand that. They cannot truly be open to what Jesus offers because they cannot see that they need it. The Pharisees certainly saw themselves as the righteous as did that older son. The righteous strive to earn God's love by being the very best people obeying all the rules. But God's love is not earned; it cannot be earned nor is God's love deserved. God's love is a gift freely given. In our story, it was that younger son, the Prodigal, who knew himself as undeserving who was able to freely accept the love and mercy he was offered.

When we strive to follow the rules, to be a good person, however we personally understand that, we do not do so because it will earn us God's favor. If we think that that is what we are doing, we have lost sight of one very, very important fact. God made the first move. God is the initiator of our relationship with God. That is why we in the Presbyterian Church baptize infants, because we believe that God reaches out to us first. When we come into right relationship with God, when we strive to live a righteous and upright life (righteousness is simply being right with God), we do so not to earn God's favor but rather in gratitude for God's love. As the 15<sup>th</sup> century reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin both recognized, we humans cannot, on our own, be upright and perfect enough by our own effort to earn God's love. The good news, the very best news, is that we do not have to earn God's love. God loves us. God loves each and every one of us – the younger son, the prodigal, the rule breakers, the ne'er do wells, the goof-offs, the thieves and robbers, the abusers and cheats, the cruel, and, yes, even the older son and the so-called 'good people.' God loves us all. We are not perfect. We can never be perfect. Be good, be upright, obey the rules, but do so in gratitude for the love of God – it is there for us even when we don't make it all the way to good. Sure God cares about how we live. But in the end God rejoices when, no matter how far we have wandered, we turn and come home with our hearts open to gratefully receive God's abundant love.