

Brother

#5 in *IMAGES OF JESUS*

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Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32 (NRSV)

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.’”

Introduction

Some sermons have a clear and obvious order to them and move from one distinct point to another and finally to a logical conclusion. Some sermons build upon a good foundation like carpenters building a house until there are some rooms in which we can live for awhile. Some sermons, like music, just create an impression or feeling. Of course, all you can say about some sermons is that they are boring, boring even to the preacher let alone the people. But today’s sermon is none of those things. (Well, I can’t say that it is not boring; you have to decide about that.)

Today's sermon is more like floating on a raft down a meandering stream and I want to note a few details of the theological flora and fauna as we float by.

Notice right off that obviously the text is about two brothers. I say that is obvious, but maybe it's not. For traditionally we have called this text the "parable of the prodigal son" and most attention has always focused on the young son who broke his father's heart by wasting his life in the far country. But if we only focus on the prodigal, we miss the point. For there are two brothers and the older one, the one who stays home and is obedient and faithful, breaks his father's heart just as much. The parable ends with the younger brother at the father's party of forgiveness. But we're not sure if the older brother ever comes to the party.

Meandering along now, you know that these Lenten sermons are about "Images of Jesus." Today's image is Jesus as "brother." Of course, the text is about two brothers but not specifically about Jesus as our brother. That's one of the meandering connections I'm making today.

There is no single verse in the New Testament that says Jesus Christ is our brother. Yet that fact is implicit in almost everything the New Testament does say about Jesus. That's why at several points in his writing, John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, argues emphatically that Christ is our brother.¹ And Karl Barth, probably the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, makes the same point. In fact, Barth wrote, "[Jesus] is man in such a way that He can be the natural Brother of any other man."²

Now don't get hung up on the male-specific language; Barth wrote in the first half of the last century. But he's making the point, as Calvin did before him, that Jesus Christ is our human brother which means we have a common humanity before God our Father. Here are some meandering ideas about what that means.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 879. "For all these things lead to the conclusion that [Christ] alone is, and is to be deemed, the Mediator. At the same time they [those who deny the uniqueness of Christ] cast out the kindness of God, who manifests himself to them as the Father. For he is not Father to them unless they recognize Christ to be their brother." On page 899 Calvin expands this thought: "First, at the very threshold we meet what I previously mentioned: we ought to offer all prayer to God only in Christ's name, as it cannot be agreeable to him in any other name. For in calling God "Father," we put forward the name "Christ." With what confidence would anyone address God as "Father"? Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ? He, while he is the true Son, has of himself been given us as a brother that what he has of his own by nature may become ours by benefit of adoption if we embrace this great blessing with sure faith."

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, 2, trans. Harold Knight, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960) 53. Barth's argument is even more explicit elsewhere in *Church Dogmatics*. "The fatherhood of God and the sonship of man is originally and properly true in Jesus Christ. It is only true for us by transference, through Him. Similarly, brotherhood and brotherliness amongst men are not a requisite of their humanity, but a new creation of the revelation and reconciliation of God. Brotherhood arose amongst men because Jesus created it between Himself and individual men, by calling them into relationship with Himself, that nearness of brothers which cannot be destroyed or doubted but is absolutely necessary and indisputable; by allowing their humanity to enter into blood relationship with His; by giving them His Father to be their Father. It is that way, in Himself and not otherwise, that He made them brethren one to another. Any confirmation of their brotherliness one to another can consist only in the fact that each recognizes in the other the original and proper brother Jesus Christ and is therefore summoned to the praise of God by him — or in the strict sense — by Jesus Christ through him." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, 2, trans. G. T. Thomson, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 426.

ONE: Families have conflict

First, let's talk about families. Every family I know has conflict. Sometimes the stresses are papered over well but they're there. Whole books are written about this. We joke about sibling rivalry as if it were inconsequential. But it is not and that is a part of what the text is about.

There certainly was, probably still is, sibling rivalry in my family. I am the youngest of six children: four brothers and two sisters. Twenty years separate me and the oldest and there are eight years between me and the next youngest. Were any of my brothers or sisters here today, they would tell you that I was spoiled as a child. My parents spoiled me and my older brothers and sisters spoiled me. In their eyes, Little Billy had it pretty easy growing up and that created conflicts that continue even to this day.

In our family, the prodigal who left home was our oldest brother. As a teenager Lee had some minor brushes with the law. He joined the Navy during World War II when he was under age, partly so he could leave home. He was the first to move away from where we all grew up. Our oldest brother always seemed to do things the hard way.

But as the youngest, I was the "good" child. I stayed at home; I didn't rebel; I was active in church; I went into the ministry. I was obnoxious.

Several years ago when I got my doctorate, my brothers and sisters came to San Francisco for my graduation. At some point during our time there, my oldest brother said to me, "Well, Bill, now you and Keith and Ivor have all earned doctorates. I'm the only son who didn't."

I felt a wistful hurt in what Lee said and I didn't know what to say. By some arbitrary and meaningless measurement of educational success, the oldest of us had achieved the least of us. I didn't think this was important but apparently he did. Something sad and difficult passed between us in those words, but it was absolutely impossible to talk about.

That's the way it is in most families. In the parable, the two brothers never talk to each other. The younger seems to completely ignore the older and the older has nothing but contempt for the younger. We can recognize conflict like that in most families and it's not necessarily chronological. In every family there is always someone gasping for air, threatening to leave, and sometimes going. And every family also has someone who is always dutiful and thoughtful, caring and concerned, and eventually filled with great resentment. Anyone gets tired of being responsible all the time and others look at the responsible ones and think of them as whiners. I saw a play once about which I forget everything except one marvelous line, spoken in anger to an older brother. "If they killed the fatted calf for you, you would worry about the cholesterol."³ One sentence captures the conflict so often present in families. Every family has conflict. I think that's why this parable speaks so powerfully.

TWO: A very strange father

Meandering along some more, notice now a second cluster of thoughts. This story is not just about the two brothers, the younger, prodigal son and the older, obedient son. The story is really about the father, a father very unlike many human fathers or, for that matter, unlike many human mothers.

For unlike many fathers and mothers this father didn't glue his sons to their sins. A Lutheran minister from Seattle once told about his six-year-old son who used one of those super adhesive glues

³ From *The Cocktail Hour*, a play by A. R. Gurney.

on a model airplane he was building. Before too long the boy's right index finger was firmly bonded to the shiny blue wing of a DC-10. He tried to free it. He tugged it, pulled it, waved it frantically — all to no avail. Only after the family located a solvent did the little crisis come to an end.

The minister then told how soon after the glue incident he was visiting a new family in the church. The father of that family introduced his children: "This is Pete. He's the clumsy one of the lot. That's Kathy coming in with mud on her shoes. She's the sloppy one. As always, Mike's last. He'll be late for his own funeral. I promise you." The minister remarked how that father did a thorough job of gluing his children to their faults and mistakes.

How often do we do the same thing? Especially to ourselves? Or to those with whom we are close? We remind people of their failures, their errors, their sins, and won't let them live things down. But the father in the parable doesn't do that. In fact, he acts rather strangely for a father. So let's meander a bit further along.

Kenneth Bailey is a Bible scholar and teacher who lived for many years in various places in the Middle East. Because he has lived in the lands of the Bible, he has keen insight into Middle Eastern culture and customs. Dr. Bailey spoke once in the Chapel at Whitworth College in Spokane. That chapel was built in the late 1970s and is a beautiful, contemporary-style building. When it was constructed a number of Christian symbols, including symbols of Christ, were sculpted into the floor tiles. Entering the Chapel necessitates walking on those tiles.

So during one of his lectures, Dr. Bailey said gently but seriously, "If you ever have a guest speaker from the Middle East, be sure to cover those floor tiles with carpet before your guest arrives. Otherwise, you will cause great offense."

Why? Because in Middle Eastern culture, one's legs and especially one's feet are considered indecorous at best and at worst indecent. You never sit so someone else can see the bottom of your shoes or feet and to walk on floor tiles with religious symbols would be like walking on the face of God himself. That's why when the Bible speaks of streets in the heavenly city being paved with gold, it's not expressing how rich things are in heaven. It's saying that in the presence of God, that which humans value most highly is worth no more than asphalt. Because in heaven we are with God, gold is only worth being walked on.

So in one of his books, Dr. Bailey points out what Middle Eastern customs about feet and legs mean in this parable.⁴ For the text says that when the father saw the son far off, *he ran* to embrace and kiss his son. Bailey points out that no self-respecting Middle Eastern father would ever run like that. It was embarrassing. It was indecent. Because in order to run, you would have to lift up your robe and show your legs and your feet. But this father loved so much he didn't care about acting strangely. He didn't care about embarrassing himself. He only cared to embrace his child in love.

And our brother Jesus told this story so we could know how much we are loved by our strange and embarrassing God. Not like the god we've been so often taught about — the god who is out to get us, damn us, condemn us. Not the god who is all about rules and obedience and doing things just right. No, Jesus told us this story to talk about the real God, the God and Father of our brother Jesus Christ. The real God is all about welcoming us home, whether we gone off into debauchery and finally come to our senses, or whether we've always done the right thing but still are far off. God

⁴ Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 181.

welcomes us home.

Conclusion

In a moment we're going to sing the famous hymn "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," the words of which were written in 1907 by Henry van Dyke and normally sung to one of Beethoven's better tunes. And we're also going to sing verse 4 which was left out of *The Presbyterian Hymnal*. I suspect it was left out because the fourth verse is very male-specific.

Thou our Father, Christ our brother, All who live in love are thine;

Teach us how to love each other, Lift us to the joy divine.

I agree with the hymnal makers. We need to be more careful about our language and not always default to male terms for God. As we saw two weeks ago, God is our Father *and* our Mother.

But in light of today's text, verse 4 needs to be sung because it makes the point that when we know that Christ *is our brother*, then we know that God *is our Father* and when that starts to sink down to the very tippy-toes of our souls, then we begin to love each other and live in divine joy.

Because Jesus Christ is our brother, we know we are children of God our Father. And this is the father who wants us to come to the party. That's why the parable has no ending. We are not told if the younger brother ever really grew up or if the older brother ever came in and joined the festivities. The end of this story is for us to finish. The one on whom the Father is waiting, the one whom he is begging to come in and party, is you.

My friend, I do not know what meandering stream or path led you here this morning. I do not know fully whether your life journey up to this point has been sad or glad, prodigal or obedient. But I do know that because Christ is your brother, there is One who awaits you, invites you, and blesses you.

Come to the party.