

It's the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent and we read about the Prodigal Son. Every third year we unpack this story, which is one of the most famous parables that Jesus tells, as he teaches those who are following him. I don't know about you, but I love a good story. Jesus was a masterful story teller, he not only held the attention of his audience with what he said, but he also taught some truths while he taught.

Today's focus passage is a tale from every phase of our life: from our wandering youth to our staid middle age (maybe only me), and into our softened old age. As we read, we sometimes take on the part of - or imagine us to be the younger son, the older son or the boys' father. It is a story of rebellion and of a love, that puts us back together in spite of ourselves and that challenges us to live generously among those we might consider family.

How many people are the oldest or first born in your family?

How many people are the youngest or the baby in your family?

How many people are parents?

Do you see yourself as one of the characters in this story?

One of the things that make for a great story is the way you get caught up in it, the way you identify with the characters of a story. If you have not already, some day take the time to read a critic's write up when a new movie or book comes out. Inevitably the critic will evaluate the characters of the story. They were too shallow, or they were "cartoonish," or they were not real to life. Or, the characters developed and grew with the story line. They were three-dimensional; they were real, which meant the critic could identify with what the character was going through. Did you identify with any characters today?

I love the way Jesus tells stories, because without a doubt, the characters of his stories, his parables, draw me in. I identify with them, because their reactions to life are so believable, they react just the way I imagine many people, in 2022, would react in a similar situation.

I don't know about you, but when I read the bible and they have sub-titles for a particular section, it can colour my thinking of what I'm reading. Some translations label this "The Parable of the Lost Son", while another translation labels it "The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother". The publishers do that to help people find a section in which they are interested. For me a sub-title is a little unfair because it frames the story, and in this case, focuses our attention on one of the sons and maybe, just maybe colour our thinking about the people. Jesus didn't label this one or any of his parables.

After all that I've just said, but in deference to the sub-title, let's begin with the younger son. Think back to when you became a teenager - What did you do that you may not be proud of today? I think I can empathize with him a little. At his early age, he wanted to make a clean break from parental control, to be his own person, to choose his own friends, to experience life in a broader context. So, with a purse filled with lots of gold, he set out to see the big world, far from "the farm" where he was brought up.

Could you identify with his desire to leave his father's house?

I've talked about the baby of the family, now let's think about the first-born son. Here is a man/a son who has loyally laboured on his father's farm, year after long year. This big brother did not make a song and dance about it, did not ask for any fancy rewards. He just knew what should be done and did it. Summer and winter, day and often into the night, loyally giving his best.

Could you identify with his attitude of loyalty to his father and his daily chores?

Two characters down one to go - now the father. I can identify with him a bit, but I think he may have a little more loving patience than I. Some here may see him as being a little reckless, unwise, and extravagant in his generosity. His generosity - some may see his generosity as possibly causing him a little bit of grief, something I don't think he was asking for or had thought of.

Could you identify with his loving patience and kindness to his son?

Which character do you most identify with from this parable? Youngest son? Older son? Father?

Now for some real life.

Four MacLeod's moved to Burnaby in 2002 while 2 stayed in Hamilton, Cameron the oldest and Scott, the youngest boy. Scott was attending McMaster and Cameron was living in Kingston.

During those first 6 to 8 months, they both visited for a week or two. Early in September, Cameron returned expressing an interest in staying with us for a bit longer – Was he anticipating his September birthday?

Following his birthday, Cameron began to have some difficulty relating to the family members. This got progressively worse and for the next 3 ½ years, he was a little lost and bounced back and forth between Burnaby and Hamilton.

Approximately 3 years after moving here, Heather met Mike and a wedding was being planned. As the plans were progressing, Robin and I decided that Cameron, Heather's brother, should receive an invitation. He attended the wedding, but the honeymoon with Cameron didn't last. He began to accuse his parents of many things; gaslighting him and abusing his siblings. He was asked to leave our house.

At the beginning of December that year, we received an envelope addressed to us, we thought it was a Christmas card. It was a letter from Cameron. He apologized for all the negative things he had said to, and about us - and he thanked us, for the patience we had exhibited. He also expressed an interest in participating in family activities again. We saw this as an opportunity to mend fences and for the next couple of months, whenever everyone gathered, he was invited.

Robin and I were flying to Hamilton to visit friends and family. We asked Cameron if he would like to stay at our place, look after Joey and have the use of our car. He gladly accepted the offer. When we told our other children what was happening, while we were away, they were flabbergasted. They could not understand, why we had offered Cameron this opportunity. We explained that, Cameron was still our son and we loved him – no matter what he had done. They didn't understand our thinking. Following this experience, Cameron got himself straightened out even more. He started feeling good about himself, began working at a bike shop on Commercial, and moved into a place of his own with a buddy.

From this experience and others, it became clear that being jealous or angry at what a sibling is getting from parents is not just limited to an older child, these are human characteristics that we can all succumb to.

I was chatting with Heather and Kyle about this week's scripture and the ideas I was tossing around in my head, for this sermon. They both agreed, that now they know why we allowed Cameron to stay and look after our place. They both have children and they love their girls – no matter what they do. One of them even said, that if their daughter did something really horrible and had to go to jail, they would still visit her. They hadn't seen it before, but they understand now. I wonder if the older brother in the parable was a parent - and didn't understand a parent's love for their child.

God's love calls us to learn to share our love with all we meet, even if we feel it is their fault that they are where they are in life. Even if we feel they deserve what they got. We are called to feed the hungry, to clothe the poor, to help the needy, to visit the sick and imprisoned, to reach out in love. To love the unlovable, the outcasts, the misfits, even the ones who hurt us the most - more often than not, the people who hurt us are members of our own family.

I suggest that if we look carefully, we may discover that there is within us, little bits of both sons, the younger and the older. And there also, may be a tension between the two; a sibling rivalry within us.

Both sides of our nature must deal with a God who does the unexpected. A God who replaces our ideas of justice and also shakes up our self-righteousness. A Father who runs and leaps for joy when an apparently worthless sinner comes home. A Holy God, who still stands in the darkness with a very respectable but headstrong, sinner.

God's welcome intends to leave no one on the outside looking in. God provides the grace and welcome we need.

This Person welcomes sinners and eats with them.

But not all are willing to join him at the feast.