

Proverbs 10:1  
Luke 15:11-32

Third Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
Father's Day, June 18, 2023

## **The Dismal Elder Son**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

Our Old Testament Lesson for today is noted under the title, "The Proverbs of Solomon."

The one verse, like many of the proverbs, emphasizes a contrast between the first and second lines. There is always a positive and a negative; or a promise and a warning. Listen to these words from Proverbs 10:1...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

Our Gospel Lesson today presents the third Parable of the Lost: The Parable of The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and finally, The Prodigal Son. Listen to these words from Luke 15:11-32...

### *Sermon*

The Parable of the Prodigal Son has been the subject of great painters, dramatists, choreographers, musicians, and writers. A preacher who has been in the ministry for any time is likely to have preached on this parable. Indeed, a preacher could preach several sermons on this parable.

Today I want to focus on the brother who stayed home. There is a novel entitled, *The Prodigal Heart*, in which it is proposed that while the younger son was prodigal in body, at least part of his heart was always at home. But the elder brother was prodigal at heart, and only his body was at home. That may be somewhat of an exaggeration, but the elder brother who shared the same father as the younger brother had no real desire to be a brother. He doesn't speak of his brother as a brother to the father, but as "this son of yours..." Our proverb declares that a wise child makes a glad father. Surely the elder son's attitude toward his younger brother did not bring gladness to his father.

The elder brother has no recognition of need in his life. He sees himself as someone to be congratulated and rewarded—“All these years I have worked like a slave for you and not once have I disobeyed you.”

This is a story about human beings. It is about the relationships among a father and his two sons. But the story is more than this. It is a parable. Jesus has attracted tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and the scribes criticize his receiving and eating with such persons. Jesus answers with three parables—The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and here, The Prodigal Son. Thus, the parable can be heard as the response of Jesus to critics who find in the presence of tax collectors and sinners with Jesus something unsavory, or repulsive, or socially disruptive, or in violation of the nature of true religion. It is not just that these people are in his presence but that he receives them and eats with them.

The elder brother is the prototype of religion in the day of Jesus, and perhaps of some forms of allegedly Christian faith in our day. The elder brother may represent Israel of that day, whose self-regard is preventing the people from seeing what is happening in their own day—that God is summoning Israel to recognize the Gentiles as equals and to receive them gladly when they make a response of faith in Christ.

In many ways the elder brother is like the rich young ruler whom Jesus encountered. (Mt. 19:16-22; Mk. 10:17-27; Lk. 18:18-23) They had both kept the letter of the law. But they had broken the spirit of the law.

Also, the elder brother is representative of the self-righteous Pharisees and legal experts who would rather have seen a sinner destroyed than saved. People who liked the law of God better than the grace of God. And of course, the Father in the story is God.

We can see a reflection of the elder brother in some circles of contemporary America. It is his to proclaim “law and order” while breaking the law himself. He is the one who implies that a person out of work is necessarily one who is lazy. “I was always able to find work, and always worked hard.” He feels that a prodigal like the younger son should really be exterminated. “Actually, you can do nothing with them.” The elder brother is the person today who views as an enemy anyone who does not agree with his politics, his economics, or his religion.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is that we love God completely, and the second, that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (Mt. 22:36-40) But the elder brother’s religion was an observance of a series of “thou shalt nots.” Perhaps it is the fault of the church, in part, that so many people outside the church believe that discipleship to Christ means little more than abstaining from this and forsaking that.

The elder brother had no love in his heart for his own brother. He did not care about his brother’s sin and was blind to his own, while the father lay awake at night grieving over his lost son. The father prayed every night that he would return safe and sound. He watched for him, so that when the prodigal son was still a long way off, he saw him and ran to him and threw his arms around him and kissed him. Then the father called the servants to put the best robe on this son, to put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Finally, he called for the prize calf to be prepared and said,

“Let us celebrate with a feast! For this my son was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he is found.” (vv. 23-23)

It’s the same message as when Jesus said, “He who comes to me, I will in no wise cast out.” (Jn. 6:37) When the younger son came home, the elder son was out in the fields. Out where he could breathe the fresh air. And he was working. The younger son had thrown away his inheritance, and he ended up in filth, feeding pigs—a task that was forbidden to Jews. The pods

that he ate were the long pods of the carob tree, eaten by animals and, at times, by the extremely poor. Like someone today eating dog food.

Note that Jesus has no word to commend this elder brother. Was it wrong for him to work? Of course not. Was it wrong for him to be out in the open air, seeing the yellow wheat tossing in the wind, smelling the ripening barley, knowing the refreshing smell and feel of the evening shower? No. Was it wrong for him to be a clean and decent person? A law-abiding citizen. No.

Why then do we hear no good word about this elder son. First, because he has no love for his own brother. The elder son is out in the field, and he hears dancing and music, and comes toward the house. He asks a servant what's going on. The servant tells him about the celebration for the lost son who has returned. A party—where song, music, and dance are part of the outward expression of the father's joy over the son who has come back from the far country, as one alive from the dead. One lost, now found. The outward expression of a love that had hoped and endured all things.

Perhaps the elder brother is wondering why he wasn't consulted. When receiving the news about his brother, he grows angry. He allows envy to grip his heart. Remember envy? It was through envy that Cain murdered Abel. It was through envy that his brothers sold Joseph into slavery. It was envy that hurled the dart at David. It was envy that plaited the crown of thorns for the brow of our Lord. It was envy that nailed him to the cross. "He knew that for envy they had delivered him up." (Mt. 27:18)

There is a second reason that Jesus had no word to commend him. Namely, he was a drudge. His life bore no excitement nor joy. His work was dismal, something to get done with.

Then we must note that the elder brother's relationship with his father was a lifeless one. There was no joy, no purpose, no meaning—"These many years have I worked for you like a *slave*." So while he bore the name of a son, he carried the heart of a servant.

There are two nurses in the same hospital. The first goes about her duties, watches over her patients, takes their temperature, gives them their medicine. She is very capable and efficient. And yet the only purpose she has in her work is that check that comes at the end of the month. The second nurse likewise looks after her patients. She performs the same duties as the first nurse. And she is no more efficient or capable than the first. Yet she sees herself as a servant of Christ, ministering to the needs of people who have been created and loved by God. And in her heart are these words:

Oh, how could I serve in the wards  
If the Hope of the world were a lie.  
How could I endure the sights  
And the loathsome smell of disease  
But that he said: Ye do it for me  
When ye do it for these.

What about us? At the office, at home, in school. Do we have a vision that goes beyond our daily chores? To be sure, there are some jobs that can be very boring. But on the other hand, there are some people who can make a drudgery out of singing a beautiful anthem, while others can make a poem out of scrubbing a floor. His approach to his work made him a dismal elder son. It's sad to consider what might have been his. "Son, you are ever with me, and all that I have is yours." Who is lost? Both sons are lost.

The good news is that God wants to give us his blessing in our joys and celebrations. He wants to encourage us in our sorrow and loneliness. He wants to help us in times of hardship and temptation. He wants to comfort and strengthen us when our hearts are broken and our hopes are shattered.

What a tragedy when we reflect a prodigal heart and are unwilling to receive. When we are spiritually poor though we might be rich. When life is a chore and might be more of a sacred journey. When we are weak and might be strong. Defeated and might be conquerors.

“All that I have is yours; and you are ever with me.”

Shall we not claim what the heavenly Father longs to give us? Shall we whose hearts are restless not come home to live in him. Shall we not let him raise us up with new purpose and direction and strength and confidence. Shall we not welcome home those who have left and would return; care for those different from us.

The father not only had two sons, but loved two sons, and was generous to two sons. People need to be a little more tolerant of others. God’s love is both/and, not either/or. The embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older; the love of tax collectors and sinners does not negate love of Pharisees and scribes. Such is the love of God—our heavenly Father—for you, and for me.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.