

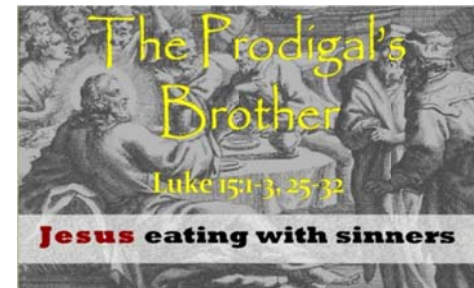
“The Prodigal’s Brother”

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Luke 15:1-3, 25-32 = The Prodigal’s Brother

NCIS is one of my favorite shows ~ that and just about any other drama involving crime and punishment. I like to see justice done ~ the bad guys getting what they deserve. I suspect that every one of us has a secret desire to have our sense of justice reinforced regularly ~ certainly more than we see in real life. We all cringe when the bad guys get a light sentence or worse, when they get off. We all have a bit of the elder sibling in each of us.



The elder brother is like the one person who aced the test but everyone else does so poorly the teacher decides to throw out the test for everyone. “Why did I work so hard? What is it worth to study? Everyone else’s getting away with something and I wish I’d goofed off too.”

The elder brother is a good person ~ we’re good people. He follows orders and lives a disciplined life ~ in stark contrast with his younger sibling. Maybe the elder is envious that his brother blew his inheritance and seems to be getting away with it. Nevertheless the elder brother in each of us has a fatal flaw: he’s good but he’s unforgiving and judgmental.

We all know some elder brother types. Susan knew another student in high school who would run and see what Susan got on an essay, and then like the elder brother would try and make the teacher justify why Susan made a 98 and he only made a 97. I had a similar experience with a student in my own high school. Judging, always judging ~ competing over everything.



People of the Way should know better, but we all know some elder brother characters among the followers of Jesus.

Fred Craddock, retired preaching professor writes this:

"[Some time] ago I preached in a little church in North Georgia... I preached on the prodigal son. A young attorney afterward said to me, 'I know that's in there, but I don't think it's wise to be preaching that now.' [Craddock responded] "Why?" ... "it encourages irresponsibility among our young people.' [Craddock] 'You think the party should have been for the older brother?' ... 'that would have helped.' [Craddock concludes]: He's a fine churchman ... but he's still struggling with some dense and difficult material here."¹



Our call is to deal with our own innate tendency to judge others by our own hypocritical standards, to reject the repentant lamb returning to the fold. .

Kennon Callahan, church consultant says this and it is so true:

"The great churches in Christendom are those that have learned the art of accepting 'unacceptable persons.'"²



"One way [to demonstrate this] is for two or three of the leaders in that congregation to learn the art of loving the 'black sheep' in their own families."³

Not easy, but we have some folks in our congregation who have already learned this difficult life lesson the hard way. That's not to say that the elder brother isn't hovering over one shoulder resisting the lesson at every step. But the parable of the Prodigal's Older Sibling is really real. Believe it.

This parable of the Prodigal Child has been lived out many times. Nancy Jo Kemper writes of how in the church she attends in Lexington, KY a girl in the youth group got pregnant. Only 17, not yet out of high school, she was the second generation to play this out. Her own mother was 16 and unmarried when Crystal was born.



Yet [Kemper] writes: "the grandmother is steadfast ... has brought [the grandchildren] to church every Sunday of their lives ... though it meant a trip of some 25 miles ... from the trailer park where they lived."



“Crystal was married a couple of months ago to the father of her baby, a 20 year old who also had not finished high school. He had long hair, several earrings, wore army fatigues, looked unwashed. But he seemed really excited about the baby. His mother plus [Crystal’s] grandmother ... and some church members put on a semi-big wedding, [complete] with wedding gown, train, and reception following at the church.”

“[Soon after], the youth ... decided to invite the whole church to give a baby shower for Crystal and her husband. [Now at this point the elder brothers and sisters begin to whinge.] There was much muttering around the congregation how ‘it just didn’t feel right to have a shower for the girl... [It sets] a [bad] precedent ... [We don’t want to appear to] condone such reckless and licentious behavior.”



Oh, yes there are plenty of elder brothers and sisters in every congregation ~ in our congregation. There are plenty of rationalizations for rejecting the repentant sinner, for holding back from spreading God’s love. Yet despite all that, Kemper said some of the love of the Prodigal’s Father has rubbed off. Kemper continues:

“[A Disciples of Christ congregation] and every Sunday it is our habit to extend an altar call for those who might wish to join the [family of God]. [Kemper says:] I confess that I had been among those who thought the shower was [a bad] idea, but I was caught up short by God during the singing of *O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee*, when Crystal’s husband, in fresh blue jeans and starched white shirt, a crew-cut and no earrings, walked down the aisle, made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and declared his desire to [follow Jesus].”⁴



This does in fact happen ~ in congregations which take Jesus seriously.

Almost exactly the same thing happened at a congregation I served in Oklahoma. The young lady ended up pregnant, but additionally delivered her daughter in jail serving hard time for drug dealing. Add



to that her boyfriend was the meth dealer who got off by framing her.

Most of the congregation ended up flying their elder sibling flags. The rumor mill and the rejection ran rampant. Many in the congregation turned against her and her father. Several came demanding that I fire her father, our music director. Besides family, I was the only person who visited her in jail.

The outcome of these real life Prodigal Daughters' stories is the same for both Oklahoma and Kentucky. Kemper said that the young father and mother were back in school and on their way to full and responsible life. Kemper is pretty sure they will make it. The couple in Oklahoma now have a second daughter, are happy and doing fine as I follow them on Facebook.



Kemper: "We feared appearing as if we were condoning promiscuity by throwing a baby shower for the couple. [But] God used it as a sign of grace... It was a holy day."



With a true faith family around them, both these couples are making it. With folks who live out the love the prodigal's father showed, the broken can be healed and those trodden down by life and poor choices can be restored. It can happen. It does happen ~ in congregations where the elder brothers

and sisters don't hold sway.

The blessings of being in God's realm are freely available to everyone. The distribution of God's rewards is not on the basis of who deserves it ~ every one of us is undeserving. Yet with God the test we all flunked has been thrown out.



Our God rejoices at repentance. Our God is God of second chances. God wants us to be people who, having received second chances ourselves, will gratefully grant others the same gift ~ will channel God's grace. Not elder brothers or sisters who want to keep God's love all to ourselves.

A fitting end is the way Kemper ends her story ~ with just two words: "Amazing grace." Grace shared. Rewards distributed. Forgiveness received ~ and given.

¹ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 51

² Kennon Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, p. 3

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Bottom Drawer #2090 on www.ecunet.org