Sunday, May 19, 1991
THE OTHER SON (3RD IN A SERIES: SERMONS YOU'VE REQUESTED)
Luke 15:25-32

During the past several months, a number of people have said to me: "I'd like to hear a sermon on the'other son'or the'elder brother,' who is one of the major characters in the parable of the Prodigal Son. All the sermons I've ever heard on this story have dealt primarily with the younger son, who asked for his portion of his father's estate, then left home and squandered his inheritance. Then, when he was out of money and hungry, he decided to return home and was welcomed by his father, who not only forgave him but threw a big party in his honor. All the while, the older brother had stayed home and worked faithfully in the family business, and he could not understand why his dad gave a big party in honor of his younger brother, who had been such a failure."

We know how this older son feels. It's not fair. Why should the whole house be turned upside down? Why should there be celebrating, singing, dancing, and lights in every window simply because this irresponsible younger brother decided to return home when obviously there was nothing else he could do? We could understand it if the younger brother was returning home as a hero from a desert storm war in the Middle East or as a hero for some other reason. Then a party would be appropriate.

Isn't it true that most of us tend to sympathize with the older brother? And perhaps we should. It's not easy being the older brother or the older sister, the firstborn in a family.

If there is a family that does not put more responsibility on the elder than on the younger, it is a most unusual family. The expectation that the elder brother will bear the heavier burden perhaps did something to his thinking. Maybe it made him more security-minded and too calculating. He might have become more serious than he needed to be, frowned on all carefree behavior, and became suspicious of simple joy. Have you noticed that even we churchgoers are prone to this elder-brother attitude?

There is a temptation that can be a problem for all of us who "stay at home," secure in our jobs and our station in life. It can cause us to feel superior to a vast number of other people. It is difficult to walk in the city slums and not thank God for our own virtue. The individual who can look upon the drunk in the gutter and the prostitute in the doorway with eyes full of compassion instead of disgust is rare among us. For it is hard to believe that these derelicts have not deliberately squandered whatever they had.

Let's be honest. The younger brother had his weaknesses, his character defects. He wanted everything now. He thought he could find satisfaction and happiness only away from his roots. He thought that to find himself, he had to rebel against his upbringing. He believed that having enough money would solve his problems.

But there were also weaknesses and character defects in the older brother. And this is a sermon about him and his relationship to his dad and to God.

If there had been a daily newspaper in those days with an advice columnist like Ann Landers or Dear Abby, the following letter might have appeared:

Dear Ann Landers:

I never thought I would be writing to you, but we have a terrible problem in our family, and I'm hoping you can solve it for me. It's my dad. He's a fine, responsible, and loving man, but something happened recently that makes me wonder if he's losing his mind. Several years ago, my younger brother asked our dad for his part of the assets of the family. He didn't want to wait until our dad died to get his part of the estate. He wanted it now! He took his money and left home, and we didn't hear from him for almost two years. He "dropped out," and his life gradually became a total disaster. You name it, Ann, and he's done it or tried it. He went through all the money he inherited. But that's not my problem. It's what my dad did. When my little brother was flat broke, down and out, he had the nerve to come home looking sorry and humble, and he completely fooled our dad. Dad fell all over himself doing things for this worthless brother — new clothes, jewelry, an unbelievable party. Dad doesn't seem to realize how this looks to others or what it does to the feelings of the rest of us in the family. Ann, how can we make Dad see how wrong this is, how ridiculous he is being, and how this is teaching my brother the exact opposite lesson he needs to learn? Dad always reads your column, so I'm hoping that maybe you can say something that will bring him to his senses.

Signed: Disappointed Elder Brother

There are many among us who could've written that kind of letter to Ann Landers, firstborn or otherwise. We've got this problem in the family. Here's what it is and who is causing it. Now, how do we get him or her or them to act better and think differently or become what they should in order to make the problem go away? It's their problem, not ours. Have you noticed that many people who write letters asking for help with personal problems often describe the problem totally in terms of someone else? They ask for advice on how to get the flaws out of whomever it is, usually a family member or colleague at work. Yet didn't Jesus say something about getting the log out of one's own eye before one can see the speck in someone else's eye? Many of us do not allow for the possibility that we might be part of the key to the solution to the problem. Isn't it true that we do not usually want any face-to-face encounter that might challenge our own nice, neat interpretation of what the problem is and what the solution might be? Rather, we shop around for the kind of help we want, which is help in shaping up someone else.

The elder son only needs to bring his dad to be more realistic, more business-like, less sentimental, and not so accepting of gross faults and of a bad past, and there'll be no more problems in the family. Then things will be back the way they ought to be.

The second character defect the elder son had was that he found it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the fact that someone could change, especially someone close to him, in this case, his younger brother. And even if an individual had changed, he found it hard to rejoice with him because of the change. Do you find yourself having the same problem?

Maybe that's because we only look at the story from the outside. What we forget is that we can never truly understand a conversion, a change of heart, a miracle, from the outside. Therefore, it is quite natural that the elder brother simply could not get it into his head why their dad should be so terribly happy at the younger brother's return. This good-for-nothing has somehow contrived to get everyone around him excited about his return. "But," thinks the older brother, "nobody ever got excited over me. There was never a big party given in my honor. I

have never been rewarded for my stay-at-home faithfulness. How come I am being neglected?"

But was he really? Remember at the end of the story, the father said to the older brother, "Son, you are with me always, and all that is mine is yours." His dad did not say, "You coward, you don't even have the courage to sin; you have stayed respectable only because you lack the spirit to do anything else."

No, the father honors the older son who has served him faithfully. Nothing has been taken from the older brother to be given to the younger brother. Why is it that when God is generous to someone else, we don't like it? Life with God is not a pulley system so that when someone else goes up, we go down. God does not have only a limited amount of forgiveness and love, so that when God forgives and loves someone we think less deserving, there is less love and forgiveness for us.

This is a parable of the infinite love of God. God always sees us from the inside. In the case of the younger son, from the outside, it might look like God was welcoming the prodigal home too easily, but on the inside, God sees in it the blessed homecoming of an unhappy soul. And to us from the outside, the older brother's faithfulness might seem to be dull, but God sees in it the dependability of a faithful, devoted individual. How broad is the love of God! It spans the whole scale of human possibilities. And the wonder of it is that even you and I, with all our peculiarities, are loved and accepted by God.

But now let's go a little deeper into the story and into the character of this older brother. In spite of his faithfulness and loyalty, something still seems to be missing. One commentator put it this way: "Obviously, there is a kind of piety, a kind of obedience that has about it a mildewed, numbing lack of freshness and vitality that never makes a person happy. There are plenty of'good people'whose religion never makes them warm and happy, and thus they cannot rejoice at the good fortune of others. And many times, in hours of weakness, they even have a certain secret longing for the'far country'where at least a person can have a bit of'experience.' They are honest, serious people with integrity and goodwill. But there is no concealing the fact that sometimes God becomes boring to them."

Just maybe, there was a bit of envy in the older brother. Deep down, he wished he had the spirit to break away a bit, to kick up his heels. He was like many people in our time, especially those who in mid-life wonder if they have missed out on something.

At the same time, notice how the older brother separates himself from his younger brother. He did not say, "My brother is back again." No, he said to his dad, "This son of yours has come back." The problem is that when we separate ourselves from others, we also separate ourselves from God.

Further, this older brother is angry because of all that the younger brother has squandered. We can understand that. Yet how differently the father receives his poor, misguided son. He does not criticize him for wasting all his goods, but is simply overjoyed that he has him back again. What matters to him is not the wasted goods at all, but the person who has been regained. Despite the rags, despite the marks of dissipation and his overall rundown condition, he recognizes and accepts his son. That's the heart and center of the gospel.

And who is there among us who has not squandered something? We may have ruined our bodies or our imaginations. Maybe our thinking has been corroded by envy. Isn't that what happened to the older brother? Yet the good news is that God has not given us up.

In this story, Jesus tells us that whether we run away or stay at home, we cannot escape God's love and concern. Beyond that, whatever worldly happiness or tragedy we may find, there is the experience of coming home to God. Amen.