Sunday, March 21, 2004
TWO SONS
Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

"There was a man who had two sons." It's a familiar beginning to several Bible stories. In the book of Genesis in the Old Testament, there's the story of Adam who had two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain thought Abel was God's favorite, so he killed him — a jealousy that led to the death of his brother. There was a man who had two sons, and one was dead and the other permanently marked.

Also in the book of Genesis, Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. These two never got along with each other. They had the same father but different mothers. According to tradition, Ishmael is the father of the Arabs and Isaac one of the patriarchs of the Jews. That ancient conflict continues.

This story continues in Genesis. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Isaac mourned for his two sons as he was dying because they hated each other. Jacob was the favorite son of his mother, and Esau the favorite of his father. One son deceived the other, and he had to leave home to avoid the revenge of his brother.

Jesus would've known these stories, so it's not surprising that he would begin one of his most well-known parables in the same way: "There was a man who had two sons." With that opening, you can be sure something unusual is about to happen. And it does.

Even though the father is the central character in the story, the text does not spend much time on him. The story quickly switches to the youngest son, who asks for his inheritance so he can go away from home, leaving behind his mother, his father, his older brother, and his religious tradition. He wants to get away from them all. He traveled to a distant country, as far away from home as possible. There he squandered his inheritance in dissolute living, or as another translation puts it, "He squandered his property in loose living."

After almost starving to death, the younger brother decided it was time to go home. The story says, "he came to himself," that is, he recalled who he was. He also remembered that even the servants in his father's house ate and lived in better circumstances than he did.

Once he decided to return home, he composed a little speech along the way: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired hands." This was not an earth-shaking moral conversion or a spectacular admittance of guilt. He returned home because he was hungry and bankrupt. He had hit bottom.

His return home was met with enthusiasm and open arms. His father had been watching every day in the hopes he would see his son returning. One day, as he was looking out the window, he could see in the distance his wayward son. The father didn't wait for the son to get to the front door and then say to him, "I'm glad you finally came to your senses. You are welcome to return, but there are going to be some consequences. You need to find some way to make up for the worry you've caused your mother. You didn't even take time to contact us and let us know where you were. At times we thought you were dead."

That's not what happened. According to the story, the father ran to meet him, and before his son could say anything, he put his arms around him and kissed him. He didn't wait to see if his son showed proper remorse. Only then did the young man make his little speech to his dad. What were the consequences, if any? None. Instead, the father said to his servants, "Hurry, bring out a robe, the best you can find, and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get that fatted calf we've been saving, and prepare it for a banquet, and we will all sit down and eat together and then dance and celebrate."

The party was on. But not everyone was there. The older brother was faithfully working in the field. He had not yet heard the good news. As he was returning home and got near the house, he could hear the music and the noise of the party. He asked one of the servants what was going on. The answer: "Your brother has returned, and your father has organized a big party to celebrate his homecoming." The older brother was angry and refused to join the party. His father came out and pleaded with him to join them at the banquet. But he said to his dad, "All these years I have been a faithful son. I have obeyed the rules. I have never been disobedient. Yet you never gave me a party so I could invite my friends and celebrate. But when your disobedient younger son has returned from his wanderings — when he has wasted his inheritance and lived with prostitutes — you organized a big party."

Now the father said to his older son, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But surely we can all still celebrate when your brother, who we thought was lost and dead, is now found and returned."

Note especially the context of this parable. Why did Jesus tell this story, and to whom was it directed? People had been complaining because Jesus had been welcoming sinners and even eating with them. In answer to their complaints, he told three stories: one about a lost sheep that was found, another about a lost coin that was found, and this one about a son who had been lost and was welcomed back with a big party.

These are stories about the joy of God's grace and about celebrating that grace by eating together at God's banquet. Consider the symbolism of eating together. This man with two sons has trouble getting his family to sit down at the same table for a meal and a party. The younger son is so affected by his sense of unworthiness that he is prepared to eat the rest of his meals in the kitchen with the hired hands. The older son is so filled with jealousy and so angry at his father's unfairness in welcoming his younger brother home that he does not want to eat with anyone who has not earned a place at the table. Both sons suffer from the illusion that they can be in relationship with their father without relating to each other.

As I was studying this story again this past week, I discovered several elements in the story that often are overlooked. One is the party. It was the eating, the music, and the dancing that offended the older brother. Of course, let the younger brother return. Both Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of penitent people, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with music and dancing? Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not to a banquet. Let the prodigal return in sackcloth and ashes. Do not give him a new robe, an expensive ring, and new sandals. Let him come crawling on his knees, not dancing. Is throwing a party a proper response to sin and repentance?

What kind of family values is the father communicating by having a party for such a renegade? What kind of virtue does that encourage?

Fred Craddock, in one of his sermons on this story, changed the ending and had the father slip the ring and robe and sandals on the older brother, then kill the fatted calf in honor of his years of faithfulness and obedience. A woman in the back of the church yelled out, “That’s the way it should have been written.”

I met a man who would agree with this woman. He said to me, “I am the oldest son. I dutifully broke in my parents and consistently took the rap for my younger brother when he messed up. I paved the way for him. For those of us who did what we should, it is more than a little frustrating to read about one more example of a younger sibling who gets off the hook. My parents would say to me, ‘Where have you been?’ or ‘I hope you’re sorry for what you’ve put us through.’ But when my younger brother would come home after curfew, there were no consequences. He was never grounded.”

He went on to say, “What does it take to have a party given for people like me around here? Even in our churches, forgiveness and repentance are rewarded, but faithfulness gets little recognition. What about those of us who have never messed up, who have stayed close to home? Do we have to totally mess up our lives before we get a little recognition?”

What is forgotten in this story is that the older brother did get recognition. The father made a special effort to invite him to join the party. He also told him, “All that is mine is yours.” He was saying, “My love for you is the same and equal as it is for your younger brother.” He went on to say, “We had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and was found. Why can’t you be happy with us?”

In this story, the father realized that he has lost two sons. He lost the oldest to a fate far more dangerous than the younger one. He has lost his oldest son to envy and self-righteousness, so much so that he would rather see himself excluded from the family than be included in a home that he thinks is not fair. Both sons were lost.

Both sons were found. Both were invited to the party. One was not a winner and the other a loser. Too often, people make the mistake of thinking that if there are winners, there must also be losers. That is true of the games we play. It’s true in other parts of our competitive society as well.

But it’s a big mistake when you want to divide all of life into winners and losers. In too much of our religious thinking, people want to do that — sinners and saints, those who are included in God’s domain and those who are not; those who are going to heaven and those who are going to hell; Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, rich and poor, tax collector and Pharisee, male and female, gay and straight, black and white, older son and younger son.

This story, however, describes a God who invites everyone to eat at the table. God does not divide people into winners and losers. God’s love is both/and, not either/or. The welcome back and the embrace of the younger son does not mean the rejection of the older brother; the love of tax collectors and sinners does not negate God’s love of Pharisees and scribes.

Nothing has been taken from the older brother and given to the younger brother. So why is it, then, that when God is forgiving and loving to someone you think doesn’t deserve it, you resent it? Life with God is not a pulley system so that when someone else goes up, you go down. God does not have a limited amount of love and forgiveness to apply, so that when God loves and forgives someone you think is not deserving, there is less love and forgiveness for you.

If you're like many people, you are accustomed to finding a catch in every promise, but in Jesus' stories of God's extravagant grace, there is no catch, no loophole disqualifying you or anyone from God's love. Each one of his stories has an ending you might think of as being too good to be true. The fact is, the ending is so good it must be true. Jesus did not tell stories like this one so much to teach you how to live. He told them to correct your notions about who God is, about whom God loves, and how God loves. Many of these stories, at first hearing, appear shocking. Jesus hangs out with the wrong people. He told stories about God throwing parties for people you consider losers. His stories emphasize that you cannot love God if you despise others. The only way to work out your relationship with God is to work out your relationship with others.

You are invited to the banquet. Will you accept the invitation and sit at the table and eat with people you have heretofore despised or found hard to forgive and with those you think do not deserve to be there? Will you eat with people you do not believe belong at God's banquet table? Amen.