

“Sons”

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Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Text: Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

It sure is hard to raise kids now days. Old timers look you in the face and say, “I am sure glad my kids are raised.” Sometimes you just get it figured out, what the kid wants and how they want it, and you try to get it and set it up that way, only to find out they have changed their mind.

Then there is the difficulty of struggling with your child' problems in front of everybody. From little Suzie who throws a temper tantrum in the grocery store full of women to the fact that the whole town knows my son wrecked his car last night after the dance, a parent never gets to take care of the child's problem without an audience looking over your shoulder.

Good parents never give up trying to do what is right for their child. Sometimes unhappy children run away from home and parents, which is no solution to the problem, but a cry for help.

So it is most interesting, one day, when the Pharisees are complaining that Jesus spends too much of his time with sinners and not enough time taking care of the needs of church people, that Jesus tells the story of two sons who didn't know how to stay home and be good. In the midst of the stories of lost sheep and lost coins, there are some lost children of God.

Today, we who struggle each day of our lives with betrayal of our self, we who go through this parable again and again in our lives, should see how God responds to the lost Sons. Perhaps we should also whisper a prayer today to God to “help me be like the father in this story.”

God deals with rebels and runners – those who go away from the father in body. It was a Jewish custom, governing the many ways one passes on his estate to his children. When all the children come of age, the property could be divided among the male heirs with the oldest son getting 2/3 of the estate and the younger 1/3, in this case. It was then the duty of these children to support the elderly parents.

Obviously, we have a rebel on our hands. The words of the Greek text here are very graphic. This kid cashed in all he owned. He moved out of the reach of home and

family as far as he could get. He spends it as recklessly as he can until he has squandered it all.

Now the father would be seen as foolishly loving this rebel son. The old man did not have to retire. He didn't have to turn his wealth over to boys. He didn't have to trust the future to worthless hands. But he does.

Notice the end result of the rebellion is the pits. The kid is broke. The parties are gone. The so-called friends have disappeared. The laws and rules were faithfully honored, but the end result intended from inheritance laws was dishonored by selfishness and a cruel pride.

Jews had a saying: "You could sink no lower than to keep pigs or teach Greek philosophy." The pods of the carob tree were famine food. How low can you get?

Now notice how God deals with rebels. Let's them go, can't chain them (fair minded and generous). Let's them fall. Watches and waits at the window for the child to return home.

When rebel gets his head on straight (The Greek words mean "to leave insanity behind you" and "see sense again.") he goes home, happy to be a servant (migrant worker) (hired hand) – "just give me a second chance," he says.

Father conducts a restoration ceremony – festival robe (celebration), ring on (name), shoes of (son), party (of end of a time).

The rebel was dead – lost, but he has been found, he is alive again. That is how God treats you and me, the rebel, the sinner, the ungrateful child who wises up and comes home again. There is joy with God at the return of a lost one.

God deals with "stay-at-homes for the wrong reasons" – those of us who go away from the father in spirit, even if our body is sitting here in church on Sunday morning.

There are a lot of us who will sit here and shake our heads, saying, "The older son had a valid gripe." He did what he was supposed to do. Look how hard it is to keep things going at home, while old wild Bill is spending his future. Now we are supposed to welcome the dimwit home as if nothing happened and worse yet, pretend we are glad to see him?

Well, just let me change one part of the story. What if the younger brother came home a millionaire? Good church people sometimes complain like the verse I used in a funeral sermon:

Short Shrift

Although I share my neighbor's tree,
The portioning aggrieves;

It seems that he gets all the fruit,
While I rake in the leaves.
-- George Gambier

Notice the end result of saying, "he had his fun, and now I am supposed to party to welcome him" is to keep the letter of the law as you destroy its purpose. This means you also think sin is fun. You are jealous of sinners, but scared to try it. You stay close to the father and forget how much God has nurtured you in the good life.

To the older son's huffy, "This son of yours gets a party I never had," the father says, "You are always with me." That is Greek for heaven, folks. The party is for the Father whose lost child is found.

Perhaps obedient children can be lost to prejudice or resentment or greed or envy. Perhaps obedient children can even resent behaving. How horrible is this God who accepts lost people because he is a loving and forgiving parent? God reminds those of us who stay at home in his church, how much he loves us.

So today God asks you and me to have a reunion celebration (worship). This celebration takes place in the joy of a restored community. God never rejects his children. He liberates the rebels by taking us back again into the family. He nurtures the stay at homes until his love opens up our lives to accept one another. It is God who loves human beings who kick the traces in foolishness or resent behaving in prejudice.

Anyway, Tony Compolo was telling a story about the time he was stuck overnight in Honolulu, waiting for an airline flight. He wasn't on vacation; just passing through. It was 3:30 in the morning, he couldn't sleep on account of the jet-lag, and so he went out to a greasy spoon diner down the street from his hotel (the only place that was open).

No sooner did Tony sit down at the counter and order his coffee and donut, than eight or nine boisterous, young (and not-so-young) women came in. They took every counter stool in the place, except for his.

Clearly, these women were regulars in the all-night diner. And clearly, they were what some call, rather delicately, "Ladies of the evening."

"It was a small place," Tony says in one of his books. "...and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman sitting beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Another of the women spoke rudely to her, "What do you want from me, a birthday party or something?" And it came out that the first – her name was Agnes – had never had a birthday party in her life.

Tony waited, then, at the counter, until they'd all gone back out on the streets. He had an idea.

Tony asked the man behind the counter if the women came in often. Every night, the man replied: at 3:30, just like clockwork. "Tomorrow night," Tony said, "Let's throw Agnes a birthday party. I'll come by at 2:30 with a cake and some decorations."

"No way," said Harry, the man behind the counter. "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

By 3:15 the next morning, as Tony tells it, "every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place." When Agnes and her friend came in at 3:30, everybody waiting screamed "Happy Birthday!"

"Never," he writes, "...have I seen a person so flabbergasted...so stunned... so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our song... her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Agnes – the tough, hard-bitten lady of the evening – didn't want to cut her cake. She said it was so beautiful, she'd like to take it home, and save it. Before anyone could say a thing, Agnes and her cake were out the door, with her promise to be right back.

As Tony continues his story, a stunned silence descended, then, on the diner. No one knew what to say to this crazy turn of events, so he broke the silence with the only thing he could think of – a practiced response for a minister.

"What do you say we pray?" he said.

No one objected, so Tony offered up a brief prayer for Agnes.

"Hey!" said Harry, when the prayer was over. "You never told me your were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

"I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning," was the answer. Tony would say, "Based on the parable from Luke you and I have just heard, I'd say Jesus belongs to that church too."

It is God the father who restores you and me to the Christian family and life; and it is never the arrangement of any son or daughter of God. It is that wonderful, foolish, loving, God who is waiting and watching until each one of us comes home.

Amen

The peace of God, that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting, Amen.