

All in the Family

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

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At various times in our lives, you and I may find ourselves identifying with one of the characters in this morning's parable. For example, we may play the role of the wandering son or daughter - anxious to get out of the house, take the money and run, spread our wings, and explore the world. At other times, we may be the dutiful daughter or son - the "responsible" one who stays close to home, taking care of family business or our aging parents. Or we may take-on that parental role - welcoming-back the wanderers, reassuring the responsible ones, all the while realizing that our open and generous nature may be viewed as being foolish or even a bit feeble-minded.

It seems to me that there can be some of the rebel, the realist, and the reconciler within us all. Yet depending on where we are at a particular time in our lives, we may completely sympathize with one character, over-and-against the others. And though *each* of these characters does display certain weaknesses or vulnerability, I believe that our criticism of the others is often heightened because we see a bit of *ourselves* in the others. It's like the religious zealots of Jesus' day [or today] who are super-critical of others, because those others remind them of their own imperfections. To me, the real power of this parable is that it invites us all to recognize a part of ourselves in each other; and by doing so, it may help us discover and embrace that compassionate quality of the gracious and welcoming Parent.

To one degree or another, we are *all* prodigal sons and daughters. We've all been blessed with a rich inheritance of life and opportunities, talents and treasures. Yet to a certain extent, we tend to squander those gifts. We use them exclusively for ourselves, or we cautiously hoard them. Even though we are abundantly blessed, we can act as if we barely have *anything* to give-away. Other people may be in need right before our eyes, yet we turn-away and ignore them. Or we grudgingly give the minimum we think we can spare. We live in a society that often rewards self-promotion and greed; and at times, even the best of us can chose that self-indulgent path of the Prodigal Son. But in time, like that Prodigal, we may "come to our senses". We recognize the emptiness of our self-centered living. It need not be in a far-away country, in a time of famine, but we begin to see the reality of our situation. We are far-away from where we truly want to be, and we find ourselves hungering for meaning, purpose, and direction. It's then that we discover a strong desire to return home - not necessarily to a physical place, but to a spiritual space - somewhere where we can feel connected and included, welcomed and loved.

Getting to that place [or space] isn't always an easy journey. It involves taking stock of who we are, and who we truly *want* to be. It's often a matter of *repentance* - of turning away from that self-indulgent path that we realize isn't right for us. It involves admitting that in our attempt to *find* ourselves, we have essentially *lost* ourselves, by going in a wrong direction. And now we want to go a different way - a way that reconnects us to

the people and places in Life that truly matter.

Just as there is a part of us that can squander our gifts and talents, there can also be a part of us that gets lost in our sense of responsibility. In Jesus' story, the older brother does all those "proper" things that "should" be done. He dutifully stays at home and takes care of business. Yet he ends up being as lost as his younger brother. He lives the way he does mainly because he sees himself as being *stuck* there; which makes him bitter and resentful - resentful of his brother, his father, and his own miserable life. We can hear that bitterness, in the words he uses when his father comes out to invite him in to the celebration: "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never even given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends...[You old goat!]"

Resentment, is a dangerous snare that can entrap us when we strive to be that dutiful, hardworking person, yet our heart just isn't in it. We do what we think we're *supposed* to do, but we find no real joy or fulfillment in doing it. We stand back and wait for someone to notice how hard we're trying; and then we're offended when that doesn't happen. We may *want* to celebrate with our friends, but we're too stubborn to ask for that young goat, or that classic GTO, or whatever it is that might make us feel appreciated. We say to ourselves, "If he really cared about me, he'd know what I want and need" - "If she really loved me, I wouldn't have to ask for her attention or support."

The older son does stay home, but his heart is miles away. He has absolutely no compassion for his lost brother, or for the grief and loss which his father is obviously feeling. Like many people, he squanders the present-moment opportunity for a meaningful relationship, because he won't let go of the real - or perceived - slights of the past. With this parable, Jesus is telling us that there's more than one way to lose our inheritance of a full and rich life. We can throw it away like the younger brother, or we can lock it away like the older one. When we throw it away, it eventually becomes obvious - we know it and others know it; and if we can get past our own self-pity and pride, the journey home may indeed be possible. However, when we bury our life's fullness and richness under the guise of doing the right and dutiful thing, we may have a much more difficult journey home. Deep resentment, covered by the appearance of a good and responsible life, can be extremely difficult to overcome. Yet Jesus tells us that our Heavenly Father/Mother wants us *all* to be included in that joyful home-coming celebration: Our rebellious selves, as well as our resentful selves. The great desire of our Heavenly Parent, is that all join together at that gracious table of welcome.

Jesus is telling this story in response to the scribes and Pharisees grumbling that he "receives sinners and eats with them!" These religious *purists* don't understand how Jesus can welcome and embrace those "other people" who are so religiously *impure*. But Jesus understands that *all* of us are less-than-perfect, yet the Holy One loves us all, perfectly and equally! Jesus realizes that the majority of people around him are actually *afraid* of God - both the so-called unrighteous, as well as the self-righteous. Many of them, like many of us, were taught to view God as a distant, dreadful Being, who

demands that we tow-the-line, or we will fry forever in that big broiler in the basement! And with *that* concept of God, it makes sense that we might either run-away, *or* resentfully dig-in and dutifully try to please that Omnipotent Ogre - who seems impossible to please. In either scenario, Life becomes a frustrating struggle and a terribly heavy burden.

But this is not Jesus' understanding of God, or of Life. Jesus experiences the Holy One as a compassionate and loving Parent - One who gives us this wonderful gift of Life, and truly desires that we live it to the fullest. In this story, and through his living, Jesus shows us a deeper reality of the Divine: a Gracious Father who allows us to go our own way; a Caring Mother who watches for our return and welcomes us back with open arms; a Patient Parent who draws us out of our stubborn resentment; a Loving Parent who prepares a feast of celebration for all her children.

We may have a hard time believing that the warm welcome we desire is right here waiting for us. Like the younger son, we may think that we've already blown it; like the older son, we may doubt that was ever ours to begin with. But the Love of the Holy One is ours to experience *and* to share. So, regardless of where we might see ourselves, Jesus Christ has Good News for us all. We *are* welcomed; we are loved; and we are invited to come together as One Family in joyful celebration! And the more you and I see ourselves as totally loved offspring of our One Creative Source, the more we discover our own capacity to offer that gracious love to others. For even though you and I *are* the younger *and* the older sons and daughters, we are invited to become that welcoming Mother and Father - to offer forgiveness, reconciliation and peace to all our sisters and brothers, no matter who they are or how far they may have wandered.