



* “WHEN LIFE ISN'T FAIR”

Biblical Text: Luke 15:25-32

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*Jesus' *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is one of the best-loved stories in the entire Bible. In fact, it always shows up on the list of favorite passages from the Bible. But not mine. Why? Because my name is Michael Gardner, and I am an older brother.

When we tell the story, the younger son receives our attention. And it is an important story of limitless grace and abundant forgiveness. God who loves us like the Father who goes to search for his wayward child when he still is a long way off.

That's Good News worth telling. In fact, Pastor Karen tells me it is the *Cover Art for the May-June issue of the Upper Room devotional magazine, which just came out.

But when I read the parable of the prodigal son, I always get stuck on the elder brother. *Whenever I look around the Church, there are always elder brothers and sisters here. There is Good News for the prodigal in all of us, if only in our not striving hard enough: *“God loves you. Accept the forgiveness that is waiting for you.”*

But when I first listened to Luke 15:32 and the words of the father to the oldest son, **“We had to rejoice, your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and now is found.”*¹ - it left me with wondering, along with him, *“Why does it have to be so unfair?”*

Theologically, Craig Barnes asks, **“What does the gospel say to the elder brother who lives his life playing by the rules? What is the good news for the strong and steady?”*²

Some of the hardest moments of any of our lives is when we think life isn't fair. In fact, some of our most challenging times as parents were those in which we had to explain to our children that things aren't always fair. **They didn't understand.**

After all, Ann and I were the one who taught them from an early age that fairness and taking turns and treating everyone equally was important. But then we had to try to explain why a math teacher told our daughter that girls weren't good at math.

And we had to explain to our youngest son who worked so hard why someone else got picked for his first basketball team before he did. We told them to keep on working and not give up. And they didn't. She now has a doctorate. He went on to play basketball on a state championship basketball team and coach.

¹ Luke 15:32, paraphrased by the author from the [Revised Standard Version](#) and other English translations.

² M. Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Seminary, in [The Christian Century Magazine](#), “The Prodigal's Brother,” March 15, 2012.

And now they are explaining to their own children that life isn't always fair, even though it should be, and encouraging them to not give up. It's precisely the common everyday occurrence Jesus used as the basis for a spiritual lesson of Luke 15.

Our passage today comes from the story of a family some have described it as a dysfunctional family. But really, aren't all families to some degree dysfunctional?

Well, at least mine was. When I tell my family history, what I sometimes say is this, *"My family knew how to put the fun in dysfunctional."*

Jesus tells us the story of one such family, but it is also the story of many fathers and mothers and sons and daughters, including those here today. Luke 15:11, tells us much of what we need to know to understand this family. *"Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons.'"*³ It's a story as old as the Bible and life itself.

Brothers or sisters competing with one another. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, Mary and Martha, the brothers in our text, and our families, too.

We know something about the younger brother. We even have a name for him which you likely know – "The Prodigal Son." We know about him.

Luke 5:13 says **"He wasted his inheritance in riotous (dissolute, reckless, wild) living."* Has was a party animal, wild thing, youngest child, good time Charlie, impulsive, creative, full bore, free spirit, always broke. We know men and women like him.

And in Luke 15:25, in our text today, Jesus tells us about the eldest son, **"Now his elder son was in the field."*⁴ Where else would he be? **Hand to the plow. Nose to the grindstone. Overtime. Get the job done. Hyper-responsible. Hard working. We know men and women just like him. Some of us are people like that.*

His response to his brother's homecoming is clear in Jesus' story: **"Then he became angry and refused to go in. *His father came out and began to plead with him."*⁵

So, part of the good news is here. The Father is where the "Father of all Fathers," the "Mother of All Mercy," always is. With us, even in our anger or pain.

**Over the years I've learned that the elder brother's besetting sin, is not anger or resentment which we might think is the case. It is much more likely to be worry that we haven't done enough. And when we feel unnoticed or unappreciated, we often wonder if there is something wrong with us, that we have somehow failed the test.*

³ Luke 7:36, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁴ Ibid. Luke 15:25, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.

⁵ Ibid. Luke 15:28, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.

Several years ago, Ann and I were privileged to lead a tour to Scandinavia and parts of Russia, including St. Petersburg. *The highlight was the Hermitage Museum, located in one of the palaces of the Russian czars. *Such treasures of art that stagger the imagination. *One of them was Rembrandt's ***"Return of the Prodigal Son."***

I'd always wanted to see it, but I was unprepared for its spiritually impact on me. *What caught my eye was the elder brother intently watching his sibling kneeling in front of their father whose hands convey such love, such blessing. *Unlike the old man bent over in an embrace, the older son stands straight, hands clasped tightly.

You can almost feel the hurt that comes later in his voice, ****"For all these years I have been working like a slave ... and I have never disobeyed your command..."***⁶

Being a first-born son myself, I know something about this. There is the feeling, perhaps, of ***"to whom much is given, much will be required."***

We find ourselves seeking resolution and peace with the Father's words at the end of the story, Luke 15:32, where he says to his oldest son, ****"We had to rejoice, your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and now is found."***⁷ The parable ends there.

Or does it? *We so long for healing in this relationship, a return from the dissonance of dysfunction to the dominant. We want it to be all ok. So much so that we miss a couple of things. The first is verse 31. Notice the father's tender words.

****"Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'"***⁸ Son. Hear the tenderness. Daughter. All that I have is yours. You are always with me. More than that. **I am always with you.**

*What better words are there when life is unfair? And where is the Father at the end of the Parable, anyway? Where is God when life is unfair? Outside. In the hurt. In the pain. When we feel left out. With the older brother. With him. With us.

So what is the Good News for the strong and steady? I love Craig Barnes words for older brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers like me:

"We can't just say a polite thank you ... we have to give our hearts to them ... to remind them, and us, of the gospel, lest they forget, 'You are so cherished.'"⁹

Pray with me.

⁶ Ibid. Luke 15:29, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.

⁷ Op. Cit. 15:32, paraphrased by the author from the *Revised Standard Version* and other English translations.

⁸ Op Cit. Luke 15:31, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.

⁹ Op. Cit. Adapted from M. Craig Barnes' article in *The Christian Century Magazine*, "The Prodigal's Brother."