

August 23, 2026 at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Rev. Steve Parker

Parable of the Lost Brothers

The Message

The Story of the Lost Son

¹¹⁻¹² Then he said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.'

¹²⁻¹⁶ "So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to feel it. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corn-cobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

¹⁷⁻²⁰ "That brought him to his senses. He said, 'All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.' He got right up and went home to his father.

²⁰⁻²¹ "When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'

²²⁻²⁴ "But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a prize-winning heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

²⁵⁻²⁷ “All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.’

²⁸⁻³⁰ “The older brother stomped off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, ‘Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!’

³¹⁻³² “His father said, ‘Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!’”

Sermon: The Parable of the Lost Sons

I was thrilled to get a video from our son and daughter in law of our two grandsons this week. It is of the two of them playing together. Daejeon is 2 ½ and he is entertaining Xavi his brother who is 7 months old. Xavi is laughing and laughing and it is clear that they both adore each other. Daejeon gives Xavi a hug and after awhile you see Xavi reach out to touch Daejeon’s cheek. They certainly seem to enjoy their time together and it seems they want to spend all their time together.

Today scripture is about two brothers. I’m assuming that they at one time played together and had a good time. Maybe the younger even looked up to the older at one time. However, the story today displays some family drama. As the story unfolds, there is independence, competition, resentment, poor decision making and two brothers who live their lives in

very different ways. I don't know if you have any drama in your family, but ours did.

When I was growing up, I loved being around my older brother. We'd play baseball, basketball and touch football in the side yard. We'd play cowboy, and army with cap guns. We'd build forts, snow castles, tree houses, and tents to camp out in the back yard. We'd get in dirt clod fights with the boys down the street, and fortify our tree house with all of our ammo, although we never got attacked again. But we were ready. Yes, I always looked up to my brother and wanted to spend time with him every day. But as we got older, I noticed something. When his friends were around, he didn't want his little brother hanging out with him. In fact, one day and his friends decided they were going to stuff me into a closet. I think Alan's friends put him up to it. They were determined to stuff me in there and I was determined to not go in. I always thought of my brother, Alan as the gifted athlete, but that day, I discovered something. I was wiry and stubborn, and it took them a long time before all three of them were able to get me in the closet. The more they struggled the more resistant I become. That was the day, I believe that my brother and I became competitive.

In our parable, Jesus shows that he must have known something about family rivalries. After all, he did have other siblings in his family, and at one point in his ministry, his family comes to take him back home, because they think he has gone off the deep end. Many were saying crazy things about him and he was breaking a lot of Jewish norms. In fact, the story is about two brothers that sound typical, but the younger brother is unconventional, and Jesus shows that he is also willing to take a point of view that no one else in the religious community would ever have thought of.

Actually, the story of sibling rivalry is based in the biblical accounts. Cain is jealous of Abel because God favors his sacrifice. Cain kills Abel and when asked where he is says, "Am I my brothers' keeper?"

Sarah cannot bear a son so she gives her slave Hagar as a wife to her husband, Abraham and she delivers him Ishmael. Then Sarah gives birth to a son named Isaac. Sarah is jealous of Ishmael and asks Abraham to

banish him and Hagar and he casts them out. However, years later they are reconciled momentarily.

Then the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob is jealous of Esau's position as the oldest and deceives his father into giving his blessing to him instead of Esau. Esau is enraged and swears to kill Jacob. Jacob flees, but years later they are reconciled.

Jacob's sons are jealous of Joseph and they cast him into a pit. They sell him into slavery, but years later during a famine, Joseph has become a powerful servant of the Pharaoh and he saves his father and his brothers.

There is a biblical history of drama in families. Is there any drama in yours?

The story today, begins this way. The younger son says, father give me the inheritance that I'm supposed to get after you die now. I don't want to wait. I want to live my life the way I want to live it right now.

Dr. Kenneth Baily who lived in the middle east as a boy and who taught at a college in Beirut for many years points out the viewpoint of the Middle eastern culture and etiquette. To ask for the inheritance ahead of time was quite out of the ordinary. It was indeed taking land, land that by Jewish law, would need to go $\frac{2}{3}$'s to the older son and $\frac{1}{3}$ to the younger. I don't know if the younger son resented the older for getting more, but the father would have planned carefully to provide for his family by ensuring that they would receive land in order to make a living as they started their own families. The land was not to go to the children until the father died so he could provide for his own household into his old age. The land was like a retirement policy for himself, his wife and a place where he would care for his sons until he finally passed away. For the son, to say, I want the land now would be saying, I don't want to be a part of this family anymore, I don't want this life, I don't care about you as you grow older, I want what I want. Give it to me now. In other words, they would have seen it as saying to his father, I wish you would hurry up and die. And to his brother, you can stay here if you want and take care of dad, but I'm out of here.

The father complies. He doesn't voice his hurt or his pain. He just hands over the land to his beloved son. Immediately, the younger brother sells the land, the land that was an investment for his future, and cashes it in for something that would never sustain him for a lifetime. Baily points out, that if he were to try to sell this land in the village that all of the community would have thought that he had gone mad. Something is wrong with this boy. What is he thinking? He is going to ruin his life, not to say that he is also being very ungrateful and uncaring about his father.

Still, the young brother sells the land for cash and takes off for a far away country to live his life. And the scripture says that he lives it foolishly, spending his future away in a very short time.

I don't know if you have ever set up a fund as an inheritance in your family. If you have ever set up a trust fund, for a son or daughter, you would normally say that they cannot spend it until after you die, or perhaps at least, not until they are 25 or older so that they cannot go out and spend it foolishly.

Have you ever had the experience of someone in your family or in a family that you know well, having a son or daughter who seemed to break all the norms and make a lot of financial and life choices that were unwise? Many of us, I would assume, have someone in our family that people have said, what happened to him or her? What are they doing? When are they ever going to get it together? And in this family, you might have a father that is patient with them or maybe not. Or how many times have you had sons or daughters also in the family who have lost patience with this individual?

The older brother in this parable has very little sympathy for the younger, what he would call, foolish brother. He even exclaims, "he is spending his money on prostitutes." However, that is not how his actions are described in the parable. Rather, it is expensive, extravagant, and unwise decisions that fashions his life. In fact, this story often called the prodigal son uses a word (prodigal) that means excessiveness, extravagant and sometimes wasteful.

Have you ever experienced wasteful extravagance and become resentful of the person in your family that seems not to understand responsible living?

In my family, we experience a little bit of wondering about the spending habits of our youngest brother, and I even experienced some resentments of my older brother, but as I look back at it, I'm not sure the resentments I experienced were actually his fault at all.

You see, I read this story as competition between the older and younger brother. Maybe the older brother wanted to be the good son and the younger son just didn't care. Perhaps he thought, Dad will love me no matter what. I'll just do what I want.

In our family, my brother seemed to be Dad's favorite. He was a gifted athlete, loved music and drama, liked to entertain people with his humor, and seemed to get most of the attention in the family. So was he the good brother.

I remember, as the younger, I wanted to be the favorite, but couldn't compete with him in sports, because I was slow due to polio. I even remember saying one day when I skipped church seeing my brother, taking out the wastepaper to be burned, (I was relegated to taking out the garbage. He got all the good jobs.) I'm going to be a better Christian than Alan. Kind of a contradictory thought in Christian theology, but that was the promise I made to God and myself. Whatever that meant, I think I was hoping some day to be the favorite son. After all, I was a good hymn singer, read liturgy in the congregation with the best of them, read scripture and prayed. Why wouldn't those of us who pray long prayers, sing traditional hymns or contemporary tunes, who volunteer for church committees, or give tithes, give alms to the needy from time to time who are faithful to our denomination, be considered the good brothers.

Meanwhile, I noticed something about my brother. There seemed be days when he didn't appear to be motivated at all. I'd want to go out and do something but he would rather lay on his bed and play his ukelele. At the time, I just thought he was a little bit lazy. After all, I work harder and be the good son. But really, was I the good son? It wasn't until years later, when I

realized how foolish it was trying to be the good son, and Alan I became good friends again, that I realized why my brother seemed on fire as an entertainer one day and totally unmotivated the next. I discovered that he suffered from Bipolar disease. One day high and the next very low. In fact, he spent many days somewhat depressed. We had both become ministers and it really was foolish to compete as ministers, but I confess that sometimes that is exactly what I was doing. Later, when my brother developed cancer of the liver, and after many heart to heart talks, I discovered more about my brother. He was very sensitive and had a tender heart. We often talked about growing up the experience of living with a father who also suffered from Bi polar disease. In fact, we discovered how much we really had in common. If we were to ask Jesus, who was the good son and who was the bad son based on the parable today, what would the answer be? I believe he would say, did you listen to the story? What do you think? In the end, my brother and I renewed our love for each other. That's a celebration, though my brother quickly succumbed to cancer and died a short time later.

So, in our parable, the son comes to himself it says. He comes up with a plan. I've spent all my money. I'd like to eat what the pigs are eating, and my father's workers have more than enough. I'll tell my father that I have sinned and would like to work off my debts to him and earn back his trust. I'm not sure he was motivated by contrition or more by starvation. So, he goes home. Dr. Ken Bailey tells us that the villagers would have been angry at him and would have tried to find a way to punish him and embarrass him in public. The father knows this and when he sees his son coming from far off, decides to save his son from embarrassment, and do something that is undignified, running (men never ran especially in the long robe that they normally wore.) Instead, he would bear the embarrassment himself and welcome him home. He runs to him and welcomes him and before the son can get out his speech, he orders a fine robe, a ring and a feast with the fattened calf. The father is also extravagant. He is a prodigal, like the younger son, but with kindness and compassion and forgiveness. I think it is obvious that Jesus tells this parable to show the religious leaders who assumed that the younger son would be punished and that he was the bad

son, that Jesus is saying, that is why I eat with sinners and gluttons. God is extravagant in love. He is lavish in forgiveness. He is abounding in love for someone who is lost.

The leaders are confused by this story and then Jesus puts in the zinger, he ends with the lavish father's exchange with the older, considered the good son. The leaders have wondered why Jesus spends his time with sinners and not as much with the good people. As he talks about the older son, it might be apparent to them that he is talking about him.

And maybe the last part of the story which is not the part that we usually think about with the parable of the prodigal son, is because the focus is usually on the terrible son, the younger. The older son is enraged when he finds out that the father has lavished forgiveness and a renewed birthright to his son. He thinks, I have been faithful all of my life. I've worked, been responsible, always did the right thing.

Who is the good son. The religious leaders would have said, the older one of course. But he was resentful, only worked for his father because he thought it was his obligation, he had little love and appreciation in his heart. He assumed he was the good one, and that he wanted nothing to do with the terrible son. Yet as awful as the younger son may have been, the father loves him and the father is lavish in his love. Not so the older. He doesn't know that we are all God's children. He doesn't know that God looks on us all with loving eyes.

So in the end, we are left with an open ended question. Will the older son forgive the younger? Will they ever reunite? Will the older celebrate with God and the redeeming of the lost? Will we end the competition and realize that we are all children of God? Will we rejoice and celebrate just as God celebrates every time one child returns. Will we celebrate with God?