

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, “Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business, is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things.”

The older brother understands “perpetual devotion.” He stays true to his family and the family business. When we first see him in the parable, he is in the fields. He is always in the fields. If you could ask his wife and family where he is, they would know. He has told them many times. Since his younger brother has left with a portion of the family estate, he will do the right thing. He will do the respectful thing. He will do the hard thing that his father needs him to do. He will do what the younger brother should have been doing all these many months. He will stay committed to what he knows. You will not catch him running off with his share of the inheritance. You will not find him spending his money on women in the big city. He is willing to stand up and fill the role the family requires. He will remain devoted to his family, to his father and the business. He will be the loyal son, the dedicated son, the dutiful son. He will stay in the fields working longer than anyone else, working longer than even his father asks him.

This morning, we pause to consider the life of the older son in Jesus’ parable about two boys. Many have focused in the past on the younger son, called the prodigal. This so-called “prodigal” son gets top billing. His story is front and center. His behavior gets the headlines. He is wasteful and reckless and uncontrolled. It is easy to understand why he causes problems. We cannot have every one of the children taking his or her portion of the family fortune and throwing it away on gambling and drugs and sex. If every child does this, families are left with nothing. Thank goodness, there are some who make wise, responsible decisions. When somebody leaves and goes off to do as he pleases, thank goodness there are some who stay behind and do what is right and good.

I think you and I can understand why he is so upset. He comes in from a hard day’s work and hears music playing. Like he has done a thousand times, he calls one of the slaves for an explanation. He is told his brother is home and barbecue is being prepared. In the words of the slave, “he has got him back safe and sound.” (Luke 15:27 NRSV) Knowing what we know about this older brother’s commitment, knowing what we know about his discipline to his work, we can all understand why he gets angry. We can understand why he refuses to simply go back to his house, take off his dirty work clothes, take a shower, get his family together and walks with them over to the party. We can understand his frustration. Imagine all the days, all the work, all the hours, all the time away from those he loves. We can understand why he is unwilling to jump for joy when this wild brother of his simply shows up and Dad throws a party. The old coot has been sitting out there for weeks wasting away.

We can understand because often those who come to church on Sunday mornings have made the same kinds of decisions. We understand loyalty and dedication and duty. The Greek word for the older brother is “*presbuteros*.” This is the Presbyterian brother! We name our branch of the Christian church after the elders. We give to a group of elders the power to lead and guide our church. We value the loyalty and dedication and duty of elders. So....we of all people can understand how frustrating this must be for this ELDER brother.

We can imagine the emotion when the father giddy with joy comes to him. Everyone who works with the family except this brother’s family is now at the party... eating... and dancing... and celebrating. Immediately, the old man begins to plead with his faithful worker son. “I know you have devoted yourself to working and making this farm better than it has ever been. We are doing more now than we ever have...even

with your brother gone. But...he is back now!" You can see the father's joy and relief in his eyes and on his face.

"Listen!" He says "listen" to the father who has come to do exactly that. He tells him he has worked for him like a slave. He tells him he has never disobeyed any of his directives. This is when we hear it. We hear the depth of his distance from the father and the party, the depth of his loyalty and duty. "You have never given me even a young goat...but when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" We can see a face contorted and angry and jealous and mad. The old father says something to this boy we should hear. "**Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brothers of your** (do you hear how the old man turns the phrase around?) **this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.**" (Luke 15:31-32 NRSV)

Jesus tells this story not only for all the tax collectors and sinners who know who they are. He tells this story for the Pharisees and the scribes who always stay at home and follow the rules. There is only one problem with staying home and following the rules. Those who often stay at home and follow the rules live by their own duty and loyalty. Life for them can easily become obeying tasks, obeying rules, obeying commands. One can quickly overlook the importance of grace. It is easy to forget the prophet Micah's words. "**He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.**" (Micah 6:8 NRSV) Often in the course of duty-doing, rule-obeying, task orientation, anyone can easily forget life is about justice and kindness and walking humbly with God. The older brother forgets. The Pharisees and the scribes forget. And sometimes you and I forget.

There is a party. It is a party God has been throwing for years. It is for everyone who has been reconciled to God and to one another. The Apostle Paul gets it. He writes the church in Corinth and explains "**in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting the trespasses against them...**". (2 Corinthians 5:19 NRSV) In his letter to the church in Colossae, he says what everything is all about. "**Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross.**" (Colossians 1:18-20 NRSV)

There is a party. It is a party alive with the music of God's grace and favor. The food is good and people are having a blast. They are dancing and eating and drinking and celebrating the grace and reconciliation made possible by Jesus Christ. The party is going strong. Often we get stuck because we are angry at someone. We stay there. We do not come to church as much. We do not forgive someone. We stay there. Or we attend church out of duty and loyalty but we give up on faith and its questions. We get stuck in our unbelief. We stay there and recite all our excuses about faith and Jesus Christ.

There is a party. It is a party God has been throwing for years. It is for everyone who has been reconciled to God and to one another. From one older brother to all of you older brothers and sisters...it is time we heard Jesus' invitation. He is inviting us just as he is inviting the Pharisees and the scribes. He is saying, "Let go of your grudges and your unfaith and your unwillingness to work through your questions. Let go of your anger and hatred and malice. Let go of your expectations about what the church has to be. Let go of all your frustration and anger and come to the party." There is a party God has been throwing for years. It is for everyone who is being reconciled to God and to one another.

What Jesus wants for the elder brother is to change his mind, to accept his father's invitation to come to the party and to begin the work of receiving his brother. What Jesus wants is for the Pharisees and the Scribes to change their minds. He wants them to accept his invitation and to begin the work of receiving those he has forgiven. What Jesus wants for us is to change our minds, to accept his invitation to come to the party and to begin the work of receiving those we will not allow to be our friends and our family in Christ. There is a party God has been throwing for years. It is for everyone who is being reconciled to God and to one another.

Reconciling God, enable us to reflect and pray about your good news, about your reconciling love, about what we may do to change our minds. Where we are stuck as members and as a congregation...un-stick us. By your grace and power allow us to come to your party and to begin the work of receiving those we currently not allow into our circle of friends and family.