



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Fitting to Celebrate Luke 15:25-32

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When I was a teen I wanted to work in a bookstore. That was my dream job. And so when I found out that I could be an aide in our high school library I jumped at the chance. Not only could I spend an hour a day in the library, but I hoped it might give me some experience that would help me land a summer job in a bookstore. I quickly discovered that most of the kids who signed on to be library aides were slackers looking to get out of classwork, but that wasn't me. I was particularly good at "scanning" the shelves—making sure that all the books were in order by call number—and just generally keeping the shelves tidy. In fact, I could "scan" most of the library in one period, so that was the job I was usually assigned. The librarian always appreciated how perfect everything was after I had done my work. No one else cared enough to do such a thorough job.

What drove me absolutely crazy, however, was that no one else seemed to care. I'd make sure everything was in order and that all the book spines were aligned neatly with the front of the shelves, and then a class would come to use the library and when they left the shelves would be a mess. Books would be thrown on the floor and the ones that the other students bothered to reshelf were always in the wrong place. I would grumble and complain and set to work straightening up the shelves again.

One day the librarian got tired of my grumbling and complaining and told me knock it off. I pointed to the books thrown on the floor and to the shelves that were out of order. But she had a completely different perspective. She

told me off: "We don't have a library to look pretty; we have a library so that students will use it and learn. The job of the librarian is to make sure it's ready to be used." I found joy in order. She found joy in disorder because the disorder meant that the library was being used. I was missing the whole point of the library.

I was reminded of my time as a library aide by our lesson today from Luke 15. In the first part of the Parable of the Prodigal Son Jesus gave us a very vivid illustration of the Father's love for his people—even the selfish, foolish, and sinful ones. Now in the second part of the parable Jesus drives his point home to the Pharisees. Remember that they were criticising him for feasting with tax collectors and sinners. Yes, the Messiah was supposed to feast and celebrate, but he was supposed to feast and celebrate with the faithful righteous—people like the Pharisees. He was supposed to condemn sinners. And now here's Jesus, claiming to be the Messiah, and he's condemning the righteous and celebrating with sinners. The Pharisees were angry. And so Jesus tells these three parables. In the first one he describes a shepherd who celebrates with his friend when he finds his lost sheep. In the second he describes an old woman who celebrates with her friends when she finds a coin that was lost. And in each case he's asking the Pharisees, "Wouldn't you celebrate if you'd found your lost sheep or your lost coin?" And they would have answered yes.

But the story of the prodigal son is a little different. It really gets at what it means to be lost. The younger son who asks for his inheritance and then goes off to squander it on loose living is a selfish, impious brat. Most people—including the Pharisees—would agree that he not only deserves to be lost, but that he should stay lost. And yet the father in the story, who bears the shame brought on him by son, who waits for his return and then joyfully receives him home, covering

his shame and welcoming him back into the family—the Pharisees would have rejected him too. He was an indulgent fool. But this cuts to the heart of the Pharisees' problem: they didn't understand the love of God, they didn't understand his character, and they didn't understand his purpose and his plans. They thought they knew all these things, but Jesus exposes them for having it all backwards. As I learned that day in the library, when we forget or when we misunderstand the plan, we can get ourselves into trouble—we can have a completely wrong perspective. I was angry at my fellow students for making a mess of the library and I was annoyed with the librarian for not seeming to care that they made a mess of it. I'd forgotten that the point of the library was to be used. The Pharisees condemned the tax collectors and sinners for their sins and they were angry with Jesus for seeking out such people, but Jesus reminds them this is God's plan. The Messiah has been sent not to congratulate the righteous, but to find the lost and to return them to God.

When we left off with verse 24 the father in the story had called for a great feast to celebrate. His son who was dead is alive again; his son who was lost has been found. But when Jesus started the story he said there were *two* sons. What about the older brother? Look at verses 25-27:

**"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.'"**

Up until now the older brother has been off-stage. Now he moves to the centre of the story. In fact, *the old brother is the point of the story* and we often miss that. We tend to focus on the love of the father for the younger brother, despite his shameful

behaviour. Jesus does give us an amazing picture of God's love and of his grace. But the real point of the story lies with the older brother. While the younger brother has been off squandering his inheritance, the older brother has been playing the part of the dutiful son. A third of the family land was sold by his younger brother, but he's been working hard on the other two thirds.

As he finishes his work on this day and heads home he's surprised by the sounds of a party coming from the house. And so he calls to one of the servants to ask what's going on. The servant tells him that his brother has come home. What's interesting is that the servant shows the same enthusiasm as the father. We can hear it in his words: "Your brother has come home! Your father has killed the fattened calf! Everyone's happy to see your brother has come back safe and sound!" We can easily imagine the confusion of the servant as the older brother, instead of being as excited and happy as everyone else, storms away in anger. In verse 28 Jesus says:

**"But he was angry and refused to go in."**

Maybe the servant reports this to the father or maybe the father realises the time and wonders why his older son hasn't come in from the fields to join the celebration. Whatever the case, he goes looking for his son. It's interesting that at first we see him looking day after day down the road, hoping his younger son will come home. Now in the midst of this celebration over his son's return, he never forgets his older son—he misses him when he realises that he hasn't joined the party. Now it's the son who was always right there who's gone missing—who's lost—and the father goes looking now for him. Jesus says:

**"His father came out and entreated him..."**

The father goes out to find him. He sees his son is angry, so he entreats him. The Greek word as it's used here has the sense of being conciliatory. The father knows that his older son is angry at with his younger brother. No doubt the older son's been grumbling about his brother the whole time he's been gone. The father knows that and he tries to soften his son's heart. He tries to explain to his son why he's so happy about his brother's return. It's a wonderful picture of precisely what Jesus is trying to do with the Pharisees as he tells the story. They're angry that Jesus is feasting with tax collectors and sinners. They refuse to join the party. And Jesus is entreating them to come and join the celebration. But the older son won't listen. He responds in verses 29 and 30.

**"[B]ut he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'"**

The older brother rejects his younger brother. His father entreated him, saying "Your brother has come home". *Your* brother. But he won't accept that. He can only refer to him as "this son of yours". And the older brothers now twists his own standing with his father. In order for the father to divide his property and to give his younger son his share of it, he also had to give to his older son his share as well. Yes, as a dutiful son, he's allowed his father to manage it in trust for him. That's the way it was supposed to work. But that's not how he makes his case. He turns it upside-down, saying, "Look how I've served you these many years!" Our English translation softens his words. The Greek word he uses to describe his "service" is the word for slaving.

"I've been slaving away for you all these years, Father!" But that's not true. He's been working his *own* property. Yes, his father holds it in trust for him, but it's his. And that may be part of why he's so upset. As the father says in the next verse: "all that is mine is yours". The younger brother squandered his inheritance and with the father welcoming him home, anything that he gives him is coming out of the older brother's share. The father not only rejoices over his repentant son, but he's ready to bless him. And that just makes the older brother angrier. He's not willing to share his blessing because he doesn't think his brother deserves it. This drives at the thinking of the Pharisees. If Jesus really was the Messiah, he was squandering his blessings on the tax collectors and sinners when he should have been blessing people like the Pharisees.

But it's what the older brother says next that really strikes at the Pharisees' attitude. "I have never disobeyed your command." This is the point at which there would be no doubt in the Pharisees' minds that Jesus is telling the parable about them and turning everything they value upside-down. They were the ones who had never disobeyed the Father's commands. They were the righteous keepers of the *torah*. Whether or not they'd reduced the law into a legalistic set of dos and don'ts is to miss the point. They believed themselves to be blameless before God and Jesus acknowledges this. Even St. Paul writes to the Philippians and talks about his Jewish credentials, describing himself as blameless as to the law (Philippians 3:6). This is the point of the story.

That's the genius of Jesus' storytelling. The younger brother was meant to be someone everyone would condemn. He's the worst imaginable son and then some. And most people would condemn the father too. He's indulgent to the point of being a fool.

As the younger son goes off to the far country everyone can breathe a sigh of relief: Thank goodness for that sensible and dutiful older brother standing off stage! But now that older brother comes into the story and instead of being the good guy, Jesus makes him out to be the bad guy. The story parallels real life. Everyone condemned the tax collectors and sinners. And the Pharisees make Jesus out to be an indulgent fool for sharing his blessings with them. Thank goodness for the righteous Pharisees! But as Jesus uses his story to point the finger at the Pharisees and to show that they're the "bad guys" he brings their whole worldview and their whole theology crashing down. The younger son was shamefully disrespectful when he demanded his inheritance, but now the older son is the one being shamefully disrespectful in refusing his father's gracious invitation. Now he's the one spurning his father. It's interesting that the younger son returned home humbly and accepting his unworthiness to any longer be his father's son. His hope was simply to be a hired servant. And yet now the older brother rejects his father. The older brother ironically whines about slaving away all these years; he presents himself as the hired servant. The Pharisees need to repent just as much as the tax collectors and sinners do. Their sins might be different, but they still need to leave aside their old ways and especially their misconceptions of God and his plans and follow Jesus.

Finally, in verses 31 and 32 Jesus brings us back to the celebration:

**"And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"**

Jesus has come to lead his people in a new exodus. As Moses led the Israelites out their bondage in Egypt,

Jesus is now leading his people out of their bondage to sin and death. And that's why he's celebrating. Outsiders who deserved judgement are being redeemed and welcomed into the kingdom. And notice how gracious Jesus is to the Pharisees. They're the older brother and the father say to them: "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." But there's a warning too. He's explained why it's fitting to celebrate with those who are being led out of their bondage to sin, but if the Pharisees can't see that, then they need to stop and reconsider where they stand with the Lord. They need to stop and reconsider what they expect of the Lord and his Messiah. Again, they were convinced that the Messiah was coming to condemn sinners. They need to adjust their expectations to the reality: in Jesus the Messiah has come to *redeem* sinners. And the stark warning underlying all of this is that if they persist in refusing to come to the banquet they make themselves outsiders—not because they haven't been invited, but because they choose to reject the Lord and his Messiah.

Jesus leaves the story open-ended. He doesn't say how the older son responded and there's good reason for that. The Pharisees themselves hadn't responded. Jesus showed them where they were wrong. He showed them how they needed to repent. They needed to rethink their ideas about God's plan for the world and for his people. Were they going to repent and follow Jesus? Or were they going to keep on condemning him for celebrating with the wrong people and in the process condemn themselves? They may end up condemning themselves, but it won't be because the Father doesn't desire to show them grace. In his love he is generous just as the father in the parable.

As Luke was recording this parable for posterity he knew that most of the Pharisees had refused to join the celebration. And yet the story was

still applicable to his own generation. The first Christians were Jewish, but Gentiles quickly joined them and pretty soon enormous controversies were raging. We see those controversies addressed in the book of Acts and especially in St. Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia. Like the older brother, the Jewish Christians found it hard to celebrate with Jesus over the repentance of gentiles. They needed to be reminded of the Father's love for the prodigal younger brother as he was welcomed home. But on the flip side, we also see St. Paul writing to the mostly gentile church in Rome, warning them not to discount their Jewish older brothers. The Jews were the original wood pruned off the old tree—pruned off to give the gentiles a chance to believe. That old wood could be grafted back in just as easily as the gentiles—all it takes is to repent: to recognise that Jesus is the Lord's Messiah and that in him the kingdom has arrived.

The problems we face in the church today are different, but brothers and sisters, Jesus also leaves the parable unfinished so that we can ask where we fit into the story. Some of us are "younger brothers" and some of us are "older brothers". Many of us who have been raised in the Church our whole lives have a tendency to be like the older brother: we forget that we have as much need of God's grace as the younger brother. We forget that the Church's calling and mission is to carry the good news that Jesus is Lord and the good news of cross to those lost in darkness—to the tax collectors and sinners of our own age. We often have an awful tendency to become self-righteous as we look forward to the day when Jesus returns and all those awful sinners get their comeuppance. We have an awful tendency to hate our enemies and wish destruction on them, forgetting that Jesus calls us to love our enemies and to pray for them. We can have an awful tendency to resent the grace God shows to sinners who do repent—

as if somehow there isn't enough grace to go around or as if God's blessing them with something they don't deserve and that we do. Brothers and sisters, if you find yourself thinking like the older brother, repent and join the celebration with Jesus over those who were dead but have been restored to life.

At the same time, some of us are prone to being younger brothers. We have a tendency to take the grace of God for granted. We forget the amazing love that the Father has shown us in Jesus and instead of loving him in return, we cash in our inheritance and live for ourselves. We give up our birthright of glory in favour of a life that ends in a pigsty. Or maybe we're not quite that unfaithful to Jesus, but we use our Christian liberty to justify a lifestyle that fails to honour God and we look down on our older brothers—the ones who value being blameless before God—as being old-fashioned, stodgy, and legalistic.

Brothers and sisters, the solution to either attitude is the love of the Father. Think on that as he invites us to his Table this morning. Here he offers his grace to sinners of every stripe. Come this morning and think on the depth of love that not only sought out what was lost, but consider that you and I were not so much like the lost sheep or the lost coin. Our "lostness" was by choice. We were once like the prodigal son or the older brother. We chose to walk away from Father, whether through sin or through self-righteousness—it doesn't matter which. We chose to reject the Father. But he sought us out, he sent his Son to suffer and die for our sake, and now he invites us to the banquet. In return let us commit ourselves to him and to his kingdom, let us live our lives knowing that Jesus is Lord and that his kingdom has come, and let us share the love and grace of the Father with others that they might join the celebration.

Let us pray: Loving Father, thank you for seeking out sinners. Thank you for sending your Son into the world to take our sins on himself and to die the death that we deserve. Keep us always mindful of your grace—that we never abuse your grace to justify sin or take it for granted and become self-righteous. Finally, give us the same love for sinners that you have, that we would truly desire with you to seek out those who are lost and invite them to join our celebration with Jesus. We ask this in his name. Amen.