

Two Brothers
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
March, 14, 2010

There was a man who had two sons...this is the way Jesus began the story all those years ago and you have to wonder, did he know how popular this story would one day be? I mean this is a story that is beloved of Sunday School teachers and students alike. It is one of the few stories from the Bible that it seems like everyone knows, and maybe that is because it is one of those stories that almost everyone can identify with in some way.

Raise your hand if at some point in your life, you've had a sibling that your parents let off the hook when you thought they should get in trouble?

One of my favorite stories from my childhood is of a summer vacation my family took sailing in the Chesapeake Bay. We had rented a sailboat and one night we had dropped anchor in a little cove and my sister and I were swimming off the boat. We were using the seat cushions as floats and splashing around when my father in a very level, calm voice said, "Amy, Jim, get back in the boat. Now!" Something in his voice made me look up and I see him staring off across the water. Looking out I saw two fins heading through the water towards us. My sister screamed, threw her seat cushion and began swimming for the ladder. My mother then looked down at me and said, "Jimmy, go get that seat cushion!" This is when I found that the ranking went: my sister, the seat cushion, me. As it turns out the

fins were the tips of a manta ray, but at the time, all I could think of was every single scene from the movie Jaws.

I think anyone who has grown up with a sibling can tell you a story where they felt like one was given advantages over the other; a story where they felt like favoritism was being shown.

In the parable that Jesus shares, the elder brother definitely feels this way. From his point of view, the father does everything the younger brother wants, no matter how ridiculous. And as the oldest of the two brothers, that had to rankle with him. How many of you are older siblings? And how many of you got upset when your younger siblings had later bedtimes than you did at their age? We can understand the older brother's frustration when his father even goes so far as to give the younger son his inheritance in advance! And of course, we just heard how well that turned out.

While we all have stories from our lives to relate to the older brother, I think we can all tell stories that would hearken to the younger brother as well. Who here Hasn't done something really stupid, that seemed like a good idea at the time?

I still remember when I was about five years old, the kids in the neighborhood were having a game of tug-of-war, and my side was losing. My hands were beginning to slip, and never wanting to be on the losing side, I came up with a great idea, I'd bite down on the rope and pull that way! It seemed like a

good idea at the time. It really did! But when my mom came running out, we were all on our hands and knees trying to find the three teeth that had been pulled out of my mouth along with the rope. The funny part of the story is when she got there I was crying, and she assumed I was hurt. Instead, I was crying because if we didn't find the teeth, I'd have nothing to put under my pillow for the tooth fairy. I learned two things from this experience; one is that uncooked rice can fool the tooth fairy, two is that, while it seemed like a good idea at the time, using your mouth in a tug-of-war match is never a good idea!

The younger of the two brothers never intended to squander his inheritance and end up as a servant. He never thought that this was how his life would end. Getting the money then and there seemed like a good idea at the time and seemed like the thing to do. But in the end, it turned out to be a horrible mistake.

And that is why it is easy for us to empathize with the two brothers, isn't it? It is easy for us to step into either one of their shoes because at one point or another we have been them both.

When Jesus began his parable of the two brothers, the gospel tells us that he was talking to a mixed group. He was talking to the tax collectors and the sinners (which were practically synonymous to most people those days), and he was talking to the Pharisees and the scribes as well. This parable, when told to this audience this way seems to strike the most basic chord. The sinners are the

younger of the two brothers, returning to the father, repentant and seeking forgiveness. And the older brother is clearly meant to be the Pharisees, upset that the father is so easily forgiving the younger brother and giving him a feast. The Pharisees even go so far as to say how astounded they are that Jesus is eating with the sinners, in case the metaphor needed reinforcing.

Jesus was relating the story to the two groups before him, and I like to think that this was one of the parables that the people there easily understood. I think for the people gathered before Jesus that day, it was pretty simple for them to see which of the two brothers they were supposed to be and see the message intended for them. But for us today, I think the parable gets a little more unclear.

See, I have already said that I find myself empathizing with both of the brothers. Some days I feel more like one than the other, but I can always see a bit of myself in their actions and attitudes. Some days I am angry that someone is getting attention or rewards that they didn't earn, and other days I find myself standing hat in hand and telling someone how sorry I am that I messed something up. We are all like that. We all have a bit of the two brothers within ourselves and with how we relate to those around us, but where do we find ourselves when it comes to our relationship to God?

See, this parable that seems so easy and straight forward actually has a lot of depth to it when you start to dissect it. There are lessons to be learned from each of the brothers in this story that Jesus told so many years ago.

Take the story of the younger brother; he wanted it all, and he wanted it all right now! He expected the Father to just hand over all his gifts and then, as soon as he got what he wanted, the son left and struck out on his own. And for a while, life was good. He was living large, enjoying all sorts of excesses. And then, soon as trouble came along, he realized that it was all gone. All he had done had been for nothing; the gifts squandered, and now he was alone, with nothing.

The younger brother sounds so selfish and uncaring...and yet, how often do we think about all the good things in our lives; all the gifts God has bestowed upon us? And how often do we stop and say "Thank you"? There are times in all our lives when we have turned away from the path God has set before us. There are times when we have gone out and squandered the freedom we have been given and acted on impulses that we know go against what God would have us do. Maybe it is like the son from the story and living in excess when we know we are called to help those less fortunate and to tithe and support the ministries of the church. Maybe it is holding hatred or anger in your heart, when we know that God calls us to forgive as we would be forgiven. Or maybe it is as simple as saying something hurtful, making a biting comment, when we know that isn't how we are supposed

to act. We've all done it. Said something we should have kept inside but that, in that moment, felt so good to let out! But the problem is, that good feeling doesn't last, and soon, the famine comes.

In the parable, the young brother's fun is ended when a famine hits the land and he finds himself destitute and alone. When someone turns away from God, when they decide to go off and act in ways that they know are wrong, they can often start to feel this way. Lost. Alone. With nothing left. And when they feel that way, they know that what seemed like a good idea at the time, maybe wasn't such a good idea after all.

Then we have the older brother, an angry young man who is upset with his brother and with his father. From his point of view, the younger brother has left, is no longer a part of the family. From his point of view, the younger brother is an outsider, someone who should not be celebrated, but kept out, or at the very least reprimanded. The father should not be throwing a party and giving him rings and robes and throwing a lavish feast. Especially when nothing like that has ever been done for the faithful son, the one who stayed.

I am reminded of how I feel when I see my cell phone or cable TV provider offering special low rates and deals to new customers, but still charging me the same old price, excluding me, the faithful customer from the benefits.

But this isn't quite the same, is it. In the parable, it isn't that the older of the two brothers is excluded from the feast. He can go in and join the party at any time. He chooses to stay outside, in the field, in protest.

In the church, we are like a family, and sometimes that is a wonderful thing, and other times, we get a bit dysfunctional. Sometimes we argue. Sometimes we fight. Sometimes people get resentful, because they are never asked to do anything, while others get bent out of shape because there is no one to help them. Like the older brother we hold grudges for past mistakes and like the older brother we often stay away from activities in the church because of our personal feelings; preferring to stay in the fields rather than attend the feast.

When I begin to think of all the ways that I can be like one of the two brothers, it is enough to really worry me. And then I remember one of the most important parts of this story. I remember the good news in this parable, and that is that no matter what the two brothers did, no matter what they had done in the past or were guilty of doing in the present, the Father went out to them. He wasn't sitting in his house waiting for the brothers to come to their senses and come in on their own. He went out to the older brother in the field and told him to forgive and let go of his feelings. And for the younger brother, well the gospel says that the Father saw him "while he was still far off", and ran out to him filled with compassion and welcomed him home.

And this is the point that Jesus was trying to make in this parable, that no matter what we have done, no matter how many times we have turned away or followed bad ideas, no matter how long we hold onto pain or grudges, no matter how alone we feel, God is reaching out to us. God is holding out his hand in forgiveness and love and compassion and asking us to come to join him.

The Psalm today says, "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." And we should be happy because that is us! We are the two brothers. We are the younger son, forgiven of our sins and welcomed into God's embrace. We are the older brother, affirmed and covered by God's love and called to be a forgiving people. We are called by the Father to join with every member of our family, and enter into the feast that God has laid before us.

Amen.