

The Prodigal God: What It Means to be Family
Luke 15
September 10, 2023
M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Well, here we are, the last week of our extended study of Luke 15. By now we are very familiar with the cast of characters in Jesus' famous parable—the younger, wayward brother, the equally-lost, angry elder brother and the Father whose love for both sons is so steadfast and extravagant. Last week we were introduced to a fourth character in the narrative, the missing but true elder brother. It is from this brother that we learn the meaning of Sonship—of what it means to be sons and daughters in the family of God. We will end this sermon series by focusing on Sonship from three different angles—the character of Sonship, the practice of Sonship, and finally, the community, or family, that Sonship creates.

First, the character of Sonship: Sonship in the context of Jesus' day was very different from what many Western cultures experience today. Then, sonship was a status, an “office,” if you will. The eldest son was tasked with carrying on the family name which encompassed what the family stood for and what the family valued; the name carried the weight of the family's integrity and honor. The eldest son was also expected to carry on the family business as well as the family traditions. In the US we generally place more value on individual choice and accomplishment, so to some of us this ancient notion of family sounds like a lot of responsibility, perhaps even a burden. But, in 1st century Palestine, you didn't survive without a strong, intact family. The family served as the basic building block of government, maintaining order in the society. Plus, since a family's wealth was in its land and livestock, it was critical that the family stay together so that the family fortune could stay together, because that was only way to ensure a secure future for all the family members. While social and cultural mores played into it, at its most basic, a strong family unit was the way people survived.

As we mentioned earlier, that was the reason the oldest son got a double share of the family estate. It was his job to sustain the family's unity and its place in the community, to keep the family intact. In Jesus' parable the elder brother is guilty of an epic failure in his responsibility to his family, and one of the purposes that failure serves in the story is to make us long for a true elder brother, one who, no matter how we blow it, still loves us and comes looking for us, to bring us back home, no matter the risk or sacrifice or cost. That's the nature, the character of real Sonship that Jesus, our true elder brother models for us.

With all this in mind, perhaps we can better appreciate that the early church's notion of establishing family relationships among strangers based on nothing more than their shared faith wasn't just a novel idea—it was a radical upending of the cultural norm. It was considered dangerous, even subversive because of its potential to undermine the nuclear family as the foundational underpinning of society. To the Galatian church Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (3:28-29) This was heretical, revolutionary stuff. He is claiming that we're all adopted into God's family as God's own children, and thus, we are heirs to all that God has, to the promises and kingdom of God.

Think for a minute about what it means for a child to be adopted. Adoption grants a person a decisive, sudden change in legal status. With the signing and filing of a set of legal documents, a child's relationship to his or her new family is forever altered. Several years ago, when my friend Mary was in the process of adopting a baby, for 15 months she made trips back and forth to Guatemala. Those trips were punctuated by months of nervous waiting and anxiety-producing uncertainty. There were tears of joy at reunions and tears of heartbreak at goodbyes. Finally, after all the red-tape, all the setbacks, when every “t” had been crossed and “i” dotted and that final signature collected, Elena was put in Mary's arms, and there was no going back. In that instant, everything changed. Mary became a parent and Elena became her daughter—with a new name, a new home, a new family and a new future.

In a similar way, our status as children of God confers on us certain rights, responsibilities and privileges—what we might call practices of Sonship. First, there is a deep security that is ours when we grasp how thoroughly complete our adoption into God's family is. In Jesus' parable, the younger son returns home ready to become one of his father's hired hands. A hired hand has no security. If you mess up, you can be let go. You have neither the legal status nor the love and loyalty that come with being a son or daughter. Many parents know what it is to say, “I may not like the choice my child is making, but I will never stop loving them and they will never stop being my child.” If the parable of the prodigal son teaches us anything, it is that God never stops loving us. There is a profound security that we have as family that we would not have any other way.

In addition to security, heirs have intimate access to their parent. What parent does not get out of bed in the middle of the night, leave work, cancel a trip

or change plans all for the sake of meeting the needs of a child? One cry, one phone call, one slightly elevated temperature, or one hint of trouble is all it takes, and we are immediately available. We actually have very few people in our lives to whom we grant that kind of access, yet God is available to us anytime, all the time. It doesn't matter what's on our minds—from the most mundane details of daily life to the biggest mysteries of the ages; from our private fears to our heartfelt concerns for others, God is never too busy or preoccupied to be present to us. Sometimes we forget or take for granted that we have that kind of access to God. Our adoption into God's family assures us that we do.

Sonship also impacts our future hope. Like the elder son in the parable, we are destined as God's heirs to take over the family business, and God's business is redeeming and restoring the earth. We pray each week, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it in heaven." And God is answering and will continue to answer our prayer. Christ will come again to establish a new heaven and a new earth where God's kingdom is fully implemented, and we will take our places as part of God's family in that kingdom. For now, when the world looks at us, the family resemblance in us ought to be so strong that people will say, "she must be a Christian; she looks just like Jesus. They are the spitting image of God; I can see that family DNA all through them." Author and pastor Timothy Keller suggests that when we're suffering, when life isn't going as we had hoped, that's a time to think about our inheritance in Christ. We are heirs of the Creator of the universe, and that Creator will heal what has been broken and restore all that sin has marred. And the pain we experience, even the scars that we bear—the regrets, the hurt, the losses and the griefs—will be part of what is finally and fully redeemed. Our hope is in the One who is able to make good on that promise.

In addition to the character and practice of Sonship, we finally look at the community that Sonship creates. The first word the church usually uses to describe the unique kind of community that we are called to be is "love." We are brothers and sisters, joint heirs of Christ, and we are called to live in familial love with one another, but the love we're called to is a very particular kind of love, a love that the early church understood to make claims on members of the family. This love is an undifferentiated, unconditional commitment. You don't get to choose your siblings at home, and inside the church we don't get to pick and choose who we will love, either.

Our families have a profound life-shaping impact on us. We are who we are in large part because of the people we live with. We are exposed to and formed by their values, their communication skills, or lack thereof, the way they respond to

opportunities and problems, how they relate to people, deal with conflict, what prejudices they hold, what they prioritize. Few, if any, of us gets everything we need or wish we had from our families. I love my family dearly. I am grateful for them and I have been profoundly blessed by them. But, I also discovered along the way that there were some things I learned from them that I needed to unlearn, so I could learn a new or different way of doing or being or relating.

Part of what makes the church a unique community is that we create a space where it is safe for this “re-parenting” to take place. We learn from one another what it means to bear the likeness of God’s family. We study, pray, worship, eat, serve, and just hang out together, and as we do, we shape one another. We commit to care for one another, to be honest and transparent and respectful. We cry together in the hard times and celebrate together in the good. We remind each other that God is present by being present to one another. We are the visible picture of God’s love, and as the younger son discovered, that love is never more evident than when we blow it and someone says, “Don’t give up. I love you. I forgive you. We’ll work this out.”

In the same way that we teach our children at home what it means to be part of the specific family into which they have been born, church is where we learn what it means to be children of God by living with and watching our true elder brother and each other. And what have we learned about our particular family over the past 6 weeks? We’ve learned that this is a family where we are not only free but encouraged to tell the truth about who we are—that we are all sinners, all lost in one way or another; that we are not perfect, but we *are* redeemed and because of that redemption, our future in Christ is far more important than whatever is in our past. We’ve learned that idolatry is a big problem for all of us, and that some of our hardest work is in recognizing it, confessing it and asking for help with it. We’ve learned that if we’re not paying attention, we easily lapse into pursuing relationships for what we can get out of them, rather than for the simple joy of knowing and being with God and one another. Because of that, repentance and forgiveness are a way of life in this family. Most importantly, we’ve learned that we are loved so much that our true elder brother left everything—all the riches of heaven and his unbroken communion with God—to come find us and take us home, even though it cost him his life to do it. Because of his prodigious gift of grace, we’ve been returned to the family as sons and daughters whose destiny is a feast, a celebration of un-ending communion with all of God’s family. My dear, dear siblings in Christ, could there be any better news than this?