

Which Brother are You?

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“There was a man who had two sons.”

Movement 1 – Who Belongs to the Church?

Who will we find in church? What kind of people, what type of people will we find in church? Will you find the purest, most holy, most perfect people in church; will you find bible-quoting folk in church? Will you find people who live the most moral lives, who live the most perfect lives and look in a negative fashion on those who don't? Who will we find in church? Maybe you might find a church of short people, or a church of tall people. Maybe you might find a church that leans towards one ethnic identity over another. Maybe you might find folks that are older or folks that are younger. Who do you think you will find in church?

If you were to go to the street, and ask around you may hear some different kinds of answers. Some may say that only perfect people go to church. Some may say that only gullible people go to church. Some may say that only self-righteous people who love to show off that they are better than others go to church. These are perceptions about who might go to church. These are ideas, founded or unfounded, of who might go to church. Some attribute John Wesley of saying, “The Church recruited people who had been starched and ironed before they were washed.” Wesley saw the church as a gathering place for stuffy, starched folks who cared more about appearance than about faith. Some see the church as a kind of country club that welcomes only those who can fit a preset list of rules and requirements. Some see the church as a place that wouldn't accept or welcome the sinner, the questionable individual, or the doubter. You wouldn't find those people in church... or so it is thought.

When I was in seminary, I took a year and tried to visit as many different churches as possible. I figured it might be the only time that I would have to visit other churches and experience other types of worship services. Each morning I would get up, and dressed up in decent clothes (in seminary I dressed like a slob). I would try as best as I could to make myself look good, because I expected that I would find in church other people who also wanted to make themselves look good. That was who I expected to find in church – well dressed, polite and respectful people.

In the passage today, Jesus is seen with people that many would not think belongs in church. Jesus is seen with sinners and tax collectors, and the Pharisees mumber, grumble and display their outward signs of discontent. These were not individuals who we would expect to find in church. These were not the kind of people that would be welcome in the temple. The Pharisees criticize who Jesus is associating with; these are not the people you would want to see at church.

Who do you expect to find in church? Who do you think will be there, who do you think will worship? Who do you expect to find in church?

Movement 2 – The Wasteful Brother

Consider the ones that Jesus is associating with, the tax collectors and the sinners. These are the outcasts. These are individuals who are not considered “church-going” types. Are they welcome? Are the outcastes welcome? Are the very ones whom the Pharisees condemned welcome? Are the ones who are looked at scornfully, with disapproval welcome? Are the outcastes welcome?

I'm talking about the scourge of society. I'm talking about the drug-dealer and the prostitute, the crooked politician and the gang member. I'm talking about the materialistic spender, the deceiver and the thief. I'm talking about the wayward teenager hanging out at the street corner, the wino with the bottle, the young

man who dresses like a gangster. Would they be welcome into the church? These are not people that we would expect to see in church.

Would the prodigal brother be welcome? The brother who offensively demands his inheritance before his father is dead, and then wastes it lavishly, would that brother be welcomed into the church? The brother who breaks the kosher laws, who lowers himself just to eat, who we find in the muck, associating with pigs, would he be welcome in the church? We might not want him with us in the pews, in church.

Think of the main character in the movie *Taxi Driver*. This is someone who is a recluse from society, who does not have the social couth that all might desire in the place of worship. This is someone who brings a date to an X rated movie, assuming that is normal and ok. This is not someone who is well balanced. Would we want this person to come to church?

Would we want to welcome McMurphy, the main character from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? This was an individual who was brash, loud, would break the rules, would swear, and would drink heavily. This is someone who does what he wants when he wants and in the way that he wants. Would we want this person to come to church?

This is a question that we all need to consider, it is the question that Christ is calling the Pharisees to consider. We say that the doors are open to everyone, but do we really mean it? Would we look at someone different from what we expect with nervous and cautious eyes? Would we look at someone different with anxiety and unease? Would we mutter under our breath that this individual does not belong in church, that this individual does not deserve the grace that we find in worship? This was a person who wasted all that he has; this is an individual who lived a life that was against what God desired. This was a person who has been involved in sin, involved in crime, and involved in actions that are not what we expect or desire in church. Would this person be welcome in church?

I am asking you to be honest with yourself. I am asking you to really think about the prodigal brother and ask if you would welcome that person back into the church. Are the outcastes, the lawbreakers, the taboo breakers welcome in these holy, and these sacred grounds? Are the outcastes welcome in church?

Movement 3 – The Generous Grace of God

Yet God's love is offered to the outcastes. God's grace is offered to those who have left God, to those who have rejected the way of the Lord. God's grace is offered to the outcastes. God's love is offered to the one who has turned from God.

In his actions, in all that he did, the younger son, the prodigal brother rejected his father. He demanded his inheritance, suggesting that his family was dead to him, and then he squandered it. He took what he had not earned, and used the gifts for his own selfish end. And then things began to crumble, things began to fall and the younger son began to realize the error of his ways. In the squalor, in the mud, the prodigal brother begins to realize how much better it was when he was with his father. The prodigal brother realizes that he has made a huge mistake, that he has not been living a righteous life, and decides to return to his father. He goes with shame and humility, expecting to encounter wrath, expecting to encounter disappointment, and expecting to encounter punishment. He does not go back to his father assuming that all things would return to normal, or that all things would return to the way it was before he left. This son, while foolish knows better than to expect a handout. He knows better than to look for pity and sympathy. Instead, he hoped that he could at least become a servant and work for food. Forgiveness and grace were beyond his hopes and desires. To be shunned, and to be given a chance to work, was all that the prodigal brother expected. Yet it was not what he received. It was not what the father offered. The brother expected anger and the father offered grace. The brother carried shame and the father clothed him with honor. The brother expected to be a servant and the father made him a blessed and beloved son. Even though he had disgraced his father, even though he had turned from his family, his father greeted him with open and loving arms. This is the story of grace that Jesus offers.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? Do you realize what kind of grace Jesus is talking about? This is a grace that is offered to individuals regardless of what they may or may not have done. This is a love that is offered no matter who the individual was at one time. This is a reconciliation that is promised to anyone who returns to God with humility. The outcaste is welcome. The one who was considered dead can find life. The one who becomes lost in the way of the Lord can be found. The outcaste is welcome.

It is like being offered a gift regardless of what you have done. It is like being offered a chair of honor regardless of your past performances. God's love goes to those who have rejected God and who have rejected the church. It is almost as if God has a preference for the sinners, the rejected, and the outcaste. Many Hispanic liberation theologians talk about God's preferential option for the poor. They claim that God reaches out to the least of society first because they are the ones who need God's presence the most. Yet here we find a preferential option for the sinner. God's grace goes out to the sinner who has had that moment, in the muck of life, surrounded by the pigs, surrounded by the swine and realizes that this life leads to death. Yet without deserving the grace, God embraces the individual, and brings that individual back to life. To that person, to that individual, goes God's grace.

Can you relate to this brother? Can you relate to the prodigal life, the wasteful life? Have you found yourself wondering if you deserve God's love because of what you may have done in the past? Have you found yourself wondering if you deserve God's grace because of the life that you have lived? Listen to the grace and the assurance offered in this parable – God's grace is available to you. It doesn't matter what you have done, where you have been, you can come home to our Lord. All you need to do is return to God. All you need to do is open your heart to the Lord, and say, take my life, and let me live. You will be lifted up, clothed and honored. You will be the special guest of the party. No matter how far you have strayed from the Lord, the Lord is ready and waiting to take you back. God's grace is available and offered to the outcasts.

Movement 4 – The Righteous Brother

Yet there are those of us who have always been in the church. What about those of us who don't have a life changing, made for TV story? What about those of us who haven't lived a life of crime. What about those of us who haven't dealt drugs, who haven't been immersed in political chancery, or prostitution, or lying, or lavish self-interest. There are those of us who haven't turned from God in such a striking and garish way. We have all had our moments of sin. But there are those of us who have been faithful to God. We have not left God. We have continued to work hard for our Lord, and have tried to stay with the church. We have all had our moments of fallen-ness, but not all of us have gone to an extreme point of the prodigal brother, and we can't relate to this idea of being lost and leaving the Lord.

Maybe we have been going to church all of our lives. We have walking with the Lord in a pretty consistent way. We have said "no" to the major temptations. We have owned up to our brokenness, and we have tried to follow the calling of the Lord. We are the other brother, the older brother, the righteous brother who has worked, who has toiled and who has remained steadfast to the Lord. Can any of you relate to the older, the steadfast brother?

If we were in the movie *Happy Gilmore*, we would be "Shooter McGavin." Shooter is someone who has been in the PGA Golf Tour all of his professional life. He has paid his dues. He knows how to act. He has been slowly working his way up the ladder. He is the righteous brother who has always been there, always been trying and working in the golf tour. Yet in comes Happy, who is crass, who is brash, and who never played golf in his life. This upstart doesn't deserve to be in the tour. This individual has no place on the green. He hasn't earned his stripes, he hasn't paid his dues. Yet he comes into the tour and receives glory and honor. Shooter is bitter.

Maybe you who are the older brother can relate. After all, why should your younger, your wasteful, and your disgraceful brother be given a seat of honor? Why should those who have turned from God be given such a

lavish welcome? Why should the church go out of its way for those who have gone so far, who lived a life that wasn't according to the will of God? Of course we're not against their coming back, but they should have to work to regain their place in the eyes of the Lord. They should have to start again, and prove that they are worthy of God's grace. You have been paying your dues, you have been working hard, you have shown that you deserve God's glory, and where is your parade? Are you this brother? Are you this Christian who has always been a part of the church, who tends to be a bit resentful, who has always been living with the Lord?

Movement 5 – The Steadfast Grace of God

You are also assured of God's grace. You who have been steadfast, you who have always been present, who has always been reliable, you also are assured of God's grace. For just as you have been steadfast, realize that God has been steadfast to you. God has not left you; God has not taken away what has been promised to you for someone else. God's grace goes out to you.

It is not that God gives all the grace to the lost. It is not that we are losing something when God favors the repentant sinners. God's grace and God's glory are constant in our lives no matter what.

Be assured that the Lord is with you like a rock, like a sun shining even when the clouds are in the way, God has not left you. Do you hear what the father says to the older brother? He reminds his son that, "all that is mine is yours." We do not have to fall into danger or despair to receive God's grace. God has, will, and continues to shower us with grace and blessing.

Remember that Jesus was talking to Pharisees who were doing the best they could to be steadfast to the Lord, and who felt a bit slighted when Jesus went to the sinners and the tax collectors. Perhaps this was how some Jewish Christians felt when Paul began to bring in Gentile Christians, and not require them to follow practices of Jewish law. Yet Paul reminds them in the letter to the Romans, that they first received God's blessings. Paul reminds them that through Abraham they are indeed blessed. The covenant God made with Israel continues for the Jews. The covenant God made with us continues with us, even as God blesses and forgives those who were lost. We are assured of God's grace without the crime, without the sin. We have been standing in a stream of love coming from and going to the divine.

We don't have to be bitter; we don't have to be resentful, for we are still surrounded by God's love. No matter what or who else comes to the church, no matter who else comes to the Lord, we are still favored. We may not have a great story of our own to tell, but we have the story of the Lord. We may not have suffered through life, but we can tell about the suffering of Christ. We are still a part of the grace and the glory. We are assured of God's grace.

Movement 6 – The Risky Openness of God's Love

Embrace the gracious love of God. I think this can be more of the focus of the parable. Not one brother or the other brother, but the love of the Father, the love of God can be the message, the hope and the focus. The parable is about reconciliation, but it is through God's love that we are reconciled. The parable is about steadfast grace, but it is God's steadfast grace. God is constantly seeking out the lost, and at the same time, constantly supporting the found – this is the profound nature of God's love.

It is a love that is opened to all, it is a love that is available to all no matter who you are, no matter where you have been, or what you have done, God's love is there for you. Let's return to that first question, who will we find in church? Let's ask that question again, but instead of asking who we will find, let's change the question to who should we find. Who should we find in church? We should find the prodigal children of the Lord. We should find those who have been wasting, who have been lost and who have been running from God. They are given a seat of honor and are robed with the grace and the glory of the Lord. The drug dealers, the deceivers, the prostitutes, the gang members, the adulators, the ones who look unseemly, who act unseemly, who make many of us uncomfortable are here, in the church by the grace of God. Yet they are not alone, for

also in the church you will find the steadfast children of God. The people who have been attending all of their lives, the stalwartly ones, the honest, the clean-cut, the respectful are all here in the church as well sitting next to the prodigal children of God. These are the people we should find in the church. It should be a mix of suites and ties with leather and tattoos. It should be a mix of people from all walks of life, all experiencing the love of God. The theologian, Letty Russell describes church as a round place where everyone is looking at everyone else, and all are given equal footing no matter who you are. She uses the metaphor of a table to describe a community of faith and struggle to anticipate God's New Creation by becoming partners with those who are at the margins of church and society. This is what the church should be.

In the book *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Tom Joad meets the preacher who talks about his experiences and why he stopped preaching. He was laying outside thinking and he came to a revelation and said, "The hell with it! There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say." It is not our place to say if someone is better or worse, only that we are all given and assured the love and the grace of God.

Which brother are you? Are you a prodigal one? Have you been running from the Lord? Have you been wasting your life? Have you found yourself heading toward death? Come home. Come home to your Lord. Come home to your heavenly parent waiting for you. Forgiveness is here for you. Grace is here for you. Love is here for you. Come home and rest in the grace of God.

Are you the steadfast brother, standing outside full of bitter resentment. Come home. Come home to the Lord you know so well. Come home to the one who has always been with you. Come home and rest in the peace and the grace of God. Be reconciled with your brothers and sisters, and come home.

We are called; we are all called to come home. We are all called to return to the grace of God. No matter where we have been, no matter what we have done, Jesus is calling, the Lord is calling, and our God is calling for us to come home. We can't stay outside of the church, we can't stay away from our Lord, for we will get weary and we will get weak. Come home.

*Come home, come home
Ye who are weary, come home.
Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling
Calling, o sinner, come home.*

AMEN