

From Joy to Anger – Lent 6 Sermon
April 1, 2012

There is one person that we have not yet considered as we delve into the parable of the prodigal son. He has been out in the fields “working like a slave” this whole time. He is the one that had to pick up all the slack when his brother left. He is the one that had to watch his father grieve night after night for his self-absorbed little brother. He is the one filled with anger upon his brother’s return. He is the one that feels slighted. He is the one that refuses to come to the feast and share in the father’s joy.

Palm Sunday is the perfect day to talk about the older brother. The Pharisees and religious elite were lurking in the shadows watching Jesus’ spectacle and they were none too happy about it. The day was joyful. Jesus was making his presence known at the very center of Jewish authority. The poor, the outcasts, the tax collectors, the sinners were singing his praises. “Yes! This is the One we are to follow!” “Yes! This is what faithfulness looks like!” “Yes! This is God’s chosen one!” They were waving their branches and shouting hosanna while Jesus rode through them on a humble donkey.

This scene smacked of everything the Pharisees and religious leaders hated. Sure the sinners loved him! Jesus seemed to throw tradition and the correct practice of faith out the window as he ate with all these degenerates. They worked hard learning every letter of the law. They were slaves to the law and fulfilled all its requirements. Of course they guarded the tradition, who else was going to do it? They were perfect as far as they were concerned – unlike all those caught up in the frenzy of Jesus’ parade.

The parallel to the story of the prodigal son is obvious. The father welcomed the sinful son back and threw a party. The older brother was outraged. He never disobeyed. He never ran off. What has his father ever done for him? He never got as much as a goat to share with his friends!

His anger was telling. He didn’t think the younger son deserved what he got (and of course, he didn’t!). He figured he deserved that much and more – he earned it – he slaved for it.

When we first started this story we made a big deal about the disrespect and selfishness of the younger son. He dishonored his father with his disobedience and demand for his inheritance. He wasted everything he got. His defiance was obvious, everyone saw it.

What we learn from the brother’s anger is that he was no better. He spoke disrespectfully to his father. He refused his father’s invitation. He thought only of being with his friends and didn’t seem to give a hoot about the brother or the father. Furthermore, the fact that he said he worked like a slave reveals his resentment. He is one bitter, angry, self-absorbed man, who thinks folks should get what they deserve. His brother does not deserve a party. The father has no right to be joyful.

A lesser person might just say, “Fine! Just stay out here and pout.” Not the father. He continued to speak tenderly to his angry son, even after his son spoke so disrespectfully to him. The father gently pleaded to the son to come in to the feast. The father’s love and affection was his for the taking.

This older son, who had worked so hard to look like the perfect child, was exposed. He did everything for the wrong reasons; for prestige and property. He was rebellious and resentful. He did not love the father. He did not love what the father loved. By the end of the story we see him for who he was; graceless and angry.

As the story ends, we don't know if he ever came around or not. It just ends with his anger.

There is the parable of the lost sheep and it ends with JOY when the sheep is recovered. There is the parable of the lost coin and it ends with JOY when it is found. There is the parable of the younger son that ends with JOY upon his return. JOY – JOY – JOY; and then thud – anger.

It ends abruptly – the next move is ours. The invitation stands. Who will accept?

Not the Pharisees and religious leaders. They held on to their self-righteous anger. This is not what they taught. They refused to believe that divine grace was sufficient to make someone right with God. They resented the mercy of immediate forgiveness – they wanted people to suffer for their misdeeds. They scoffed at the idea that sinners could be justified by faith and instantly reconciled to God. The Pharisees labored their entire lives to gain God's favor – and Jesus just gave it away. They thought that by following the law to the letter they deserved God's favor. Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. The Pharisees would NEVER do such a thing. They might risk being contaminated by sin.

Clearly Jesus and the Pharisees were at odds. Jesus told another parable in Luke 18 about the Pharisees. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.' (Luke 18:9-14)

Very few people identify with the Pharisees. Very few people will confess to being the older brother. And yet.... With my apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, you might be an older brother if:

- You wonder why bad things happen to good people
- You are faithful only for the reward of heaven
- You begrudge being faithful
- You are full of anger and resentment
- You don't love who God loves
- You only care about your prestige and possessions
- You thank God you are not like other people
- You care more about being right than doing the right thing
- You don't think you need grace
- Your brand of Christianity is the only, true brand of Christianity, the rest be damned.

Even if you do relate to the older brother – the good news is that God still loves you and invites you to receive God's grace and share in God's joy. The choice is ours.

As for the Pharisees and religious leaders; they chose to end the story by conspiring with the Romans to kill Jesus and put an end to his nonsense. They tried to silence the good news of grace by sealing it away in a tomb. And we all know how that worked out....

Amen