

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

19th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Luke 15:25-32

Title: “New Beginnings: The Joy of Starting Over”

My mentor in ministry told me that of all the stories in the Bible this one was his favorite. When I asked him why, he said because it was the way God had treated him throughout his life. He was talking about the youngest son, but the story isn't just about the youngest son. It's also about the oldest and about the father they both share. It's a story about three people: the youngest son, the oldest son and the father.

As we consider this story, I wonder with whom you might identify. Is it the youngest son who recklessly abuses his father's graciousness? Is it the elder son who is right to be angry about the way in which his father so carelessly embraces the youngest son in spite of his behavior toward his father? Or is it the father who doesn't seem to care what his youngest son had done or what his motives for coming home were, he was just glad he did come home? With whom do you most identify in this story?

The context of Jesus' telling this story is important to its interpretation. He tells it, the Gospel According to Luke says, in response to Pharisees and the scribes who were grumbling openly that Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them. Tax collectors and sinners were attracted to Jesus--and he to them. The religious people—that's who the Pharisees and scribes are—didn't like it and so criticized him for it. Jesus was repeatedly criticized for being open to all people and most especially those who were considered outside the religious community, not quite good enough, not up to God's standards or theirs.

So from the beginning we have three characters: the religious community of the Pharisees and scribes; the tax collectors and sinners; and, of course, there's Jesus. Three characters: two of them groups of people. The other is Jesus.

Hearing of the criticism that he was associating with the wrong people, Jesus tells his own story. This isn't about a real-life family, mind you. Jesus doesn't name anyone, but begins with “A certain man had two sons.” Again, three characters: A father, an elder son, and a younger son. Three characters.

The youngest son begins the drama. Asks his father for his inheritance, which was tantamount to wishing his father was dead so he could have what was his when that event occurred. This sort of thing just wasn't done and wouldn't be done now. I can't imagine

walking into my father's living room and saying, "Hey, Dad! I'd like my share of the inheritance now if you don't mind. I really don't want to wait until you're gone. I know you'll have to sell some stuff in order to make that happen, but I'm okay with that. I'd just like it now!" How bold! How crass! How unreal! He breaks all the rules here, disrespects his father and acts with complete selfishness.

Thinking of the three characters listening to the story: the Pharisees and scribes, the tax collectors and sinners, and Jesus, who do you think the youngest son might represent? (tax collectors and sinners)

Surprisingly, the father grants the son's request and the youngest son heads off on an extended vacation. He parties till the cows come home. Acts as if the money will never run out. Spends it lavishly on friends and women who will do what he wants as long as they're paid. Talk about sinners and tax collectors! This guy is about as bad as they get. He breaks all the rules.

It doesn't take long before the well runs dry. There is no more money, and once the money is gone the so called friends are gone too—and the women. Finally, he is so desperate to live that he takes a job feeding pigs. Can you imagine, a Jew feeding pigs?! It wasn't just that this was a dirty job. It was more than that. Pigs were unclean. Pigs couldn't be touched let alone eaten or such a person wouldn't be clean, wouldn't be fit for God's attention. Couldn't worship in the Temple that's for sure. Again, talk about tax collectors and sinners. This is about as low as you can go.

Then one day as he is picking corn from a cob that he saved from the bushel he poured into the feed trough--hungry, dirty and miserable--it dawned on him that he could go home and work for his father. At least he could have a decent place to stay and a decent meal every day. And maybe if he framed it right, his father would hire him to work for him. Maybe if he just told him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." Was he truly sorry? Or was he just so hungry and miserable that he'd tell his father just about anything to get hired?

Off he goes, this guy who has done so much wrong by dishonoring his father and carelessly living his life outside the rules of common decency let alone any religious constraints, making his way home with his tail between his legs hoping for some kind of mercy, at least enough to allow him to work for his supper.

His father has been watching and waiting. Off in the distance he sees the familiar figure of his boy, head down, shuffling up the two track drive toward the farm. Without thought, he finds himself running which was something dignified men didn't do. Can you imagine a man of stature grabbing his robe, pulling it up like a woman's dress, and running full tilt? It was undignified and men didn't do it. But it didn't matter with this father. All he could see was his son coming home. Dignity didn't matter when joy overwhelms. Convention goes out the window! Rules about appropriate behavior take a back seat to the gift of one loved returning home, especially when he couldn't be sure he'd ever see him again. This is pure unadulterated joy!

When I think of this scene I think of those men and women who are greeted by loved ones in airports across the country after having served in war-torn areas. The joy on the faces of the children, the spouses, feeling the deep, tearful joy of holding someone you weren't sure

you'd ever be able to hold again. Or I think of one of the Leader Dogs, a yellow Lab, named Ace. After we had him and did basic training for the first year of his life, we returned him to the Rochester school where he received intense training to guide a person without sight. There were tears all around when we let him go, but that's the deal. You raise them for the first year, socialize them in the community and give basic training before they are returned for complete training to become a Leader Dog for the Blind. We thought we'd never see him again, but he was given to a man from Georgia who is a LD rep. and so Ace flew all over the country in first class seating as Mike, his owner, represented LD. So whenever Mike was back in Rochester, he'd email me and we would travel there to have lunch or dinner with him and Ace. The very first time we did, Mike was sitting in the lobby of the school waiting for us. He had ACE on his lead. We wondered if Ace would remember us. It had been a year since we had seen him. When we walked in, Ace looked at us and then one of us spoke. Ace went berserk, jumping, crying, and lurching towards us as Mike held his lead. Mind you dogs aren't supposed to behave this way when they are on lead. But Ace didn't care, you see. Ace saw people he loved returning and that was all that seemed to matter to him at that point. Every time we visited Mike and Ace, the reaction was the same.

That's the kind of joy I see on this father's face and in his dress-up-to-his-knees-running. He doesn't care what he looks like. All he can do is give way to the uncontrollable joy that wells up inside him. He doesn't know why the son is coming home. He doesn't know if he has any money left. He doesn't know what is motivating him to come home--if he is sorry for what he's done. None of that matters. What matters is the unrestrained love the father has for this son.

When they meet there are no pleasantries exchanged. The father I imagine sort of colliding into the son, wrapping his arms around him and nearly knocking him to the ground. The son, overwhelmed and surprised, tries to mumble his motives for coming home, but it's as if the father doesn't hear a word he says as he orders the farm hands to get some shoes for the boy's feet, the family ring for his finger, and to kill the calf they've fattened up for a special occasion. Well, this is it! The party is on!

“...for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

What a gift it is to start over again as a result of such overwhelming love! The offenses never mentioned. The wrongs not even discussed. The father's love overrides everything else.

Of the three characters listening to Jesus' story—the Pharisees/scribes, the tax collectors/sinners, & Jesus--who does the father represent? (Jesus/God)

Somehow I don't think my father would greet me this way if I had done the same—and rightfully so! It doesn't seem right. It's not just. It's unfair. But Jesus is preaching about the way it is in God's kingdom. This isn't a real life family. This is the way it works to be in God's family, probably not ours. This is how God treats people not considered worthy either in their own hearts and minds or in the hearts and minds of others, which brings us to the last character.

The oldest son comes home after working the farm all day as he did every day, faithfully tending to the tasks his father laid before him. It's clear a party is going on. The fatted calf pen

is empty. Music and dancing. One of the farm hands comes out and the son asks what is going on. The farm hand tells him his brother is home and the father welcomed him home with a party, the likes of which they haven't seen. Instantly, the oldest son's face grew red with anger. He let out a few expletives as he waved his arms, venting. It wasn't pretty. What happened wasn't fair to the eldest who was faithful, worked hard and stayed close to his father. He obeyed all the rules, unlike his younger brother. It just wasn't right! The farm hand ran back to the party and told the father what he'd witnessed. And so this Dad went out to the barn to check on his oldest son. Found him sitting on a hay bale, angry as all get out. In deference to his father, he speaks no expletives though he felt like doing so. Instead he describes what he is feeling and why.

His father reminded him that everything the father has is now his because his younger brother already received what was his. Everything belonged to the eldest son, now. He reminded him that he was always with him, "...but we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found. [I couldn't help myself.]"

Of the three characters--the Pharisees/scribes; the tax collectors/sinners; Jesus—who does the oldest son represent do you think? (Pharisees/scribes.)

What about you? What about me? I invite you to spend some time in silence and find a pen or pencil if you'd like and answer—for yourself only! You won't be asked to share your responses with anyone—the questions as they appear on the monitors.

Are you like the older or the younger son? Both?

In what ways have you experienced the kind of unrestrained joy of the father?

What is the message and the challenge of the story for you?

The Good News is that God loves the eldest AND the youngest which means, of course, that you and I are within the bounds of God's gracious mercy and love. With God there is always an opportunity to start over again. We will not be the same as we once were, perhaps, but there is always an open door and a waiting God ready to embrace us. Regardless of our station—elder or younger, God loves us. Our response to that love is up to us.