

**“Resentment ... What’s It Good for?”**

During the season of Lent, the scripture lessons challenge us to root out sin ... sin that alienates us from a healthy relationship with God. We are encouraged to tear down those walls of hostility that hinder us from experiencing in our life the full impact of God’s grace and love. Over the last three Sundays, we examined particular sins like “self-glorification.” When we are so full of ourselves, we have the opinion that we are the most important person in world, which leads us to make gods out of our material wealth, power, and security. By example, Jesus teaches us that living for self-glorification is our ruin, and that celebrating life means living a life that consistently glorifies God.

Another sin is “gluttony.” When we live excessive lifestyles that leave us satiated and sad, rather than satisfied and happy, we distance ourselves from God. Make no mistake, God indeed wants us to eat, drink, and enjoy life but ... but in moderation! We are to live in ways that do not take away or divide our attention from worshipping and obeying the Creator.

If we live excessively, then our alienation from God is compounded by the sin of idolatry. We make life choices that compromise our commitment to Jesus Christ and construct “Golden Calves” that promise happiness ... quick fixes ... easily solutions. Idolatry is substituting the short-term, perishable things of this world for the long-term, eternal gifts God would have us claim.

This morning, I want to examine another sin ... resentment ... a sin that is somewhat hidden in the Parable of the Prodigal Son ... a parable in my opinion that is missed titled, and therefore leads to a narrow interpretation of Jesus’ teaching. The story is much larger. The story includes not only the prodigal son, but the father and an older brother.

A snap shot of the lesson is this: the youngest son leaves home, squanders his inheritance, and then returns. The older son stays home ... is loyal, obedient, faithful, and fulfills his duty as the oldest son. The father deals with both sons in different ways, because each son in his own way has alienated himself from the father. I do believe the central character of the parable is the father, and therefore the story should be known as the “Parable of the Loving Father.” Jesus teaches us about the love the father has for his two sons; the father’s response to each of his sons’ behavior; and their response to the father’s love and grace.

This morning, I want to narrow my message and zero in on the oldest son who stayed home, as well as his response to the father’s love and grace, because the elder brother serves as a prime example for the sin of resentment. In some ways, the elder son represents the Pharisees and the scribes who listen to Jesus teach and criticize him for welcoming and eating with sinners. And also the elder son represents us when we behave as he did. Truth be told, we are faithful people, but sometimes we resent others in our life that are not so faithful. We are faithful, but resentful of others who always seem to land on their feet ... whose lives seem unfairly blessed; people who seem to have more luck than you or I.

In fact, the elder son represents that old question: *Why do bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people?* He is the one who works hard and lives a righteous life. He is the one working in the field when his lazy, no good brother comes home broke and wasted. What is his reward? When he hears music and dancing coming from the house, he learns that his brother’s return is being celebrated and rewarded. All day long he is out in the field ... his muscles ache ... he’s sweaty, dirty, exhausted ... only to come home from work to a party at the house for his no good younger brother! Yes, he’s angry! Doesn’t he have a right to be angry? And yes, he’s resentful ... very much resentful. He’s saying to himself: “This is not fair! Where is the justice?”

I don’t think the elder son became resentful the moment he heard the music and dancing. Resentment doesn’t work that way. Resentment starts small with a hurt or a jealousy ... an unfair wrong ... some other precipitating event. Resentment smolders within us for some time, and, when the situation is right, resentment erupts like a volcano, and spews forth with destructive force. In the case of the elder brother, the spark of resentment started the day his young “hippie” brother left home with his inheritance. By asking for his inheritance before his father’s death, he committed a major social faux pas with grand insulting implications. The younger son’s actions conveyed a message that pretty much told his father that he wished his father were dead.

And so the elder son, from the beginning was peeved. He saw it coming with his selfish brother. It was so predictable that he could have warned his father what would happen. His younger brother would squander his inheritance in reckless living, and he did. But what does the father do when the broke and wasted son comes home? You would think the kid was a saint or something? He gets the royal treatment and gifts. He gets rewards that the elder son’s loyalty and moral uprightness never brought him. So, like a smoldering volcano, the elder brother explodes and lava-like hostility flows out ... a lava-flow of resentment.

Resentment shows up early in the Bible with two other brothers. Cain and Abel are a prototype of the two brothers in today's parable. Cain resented Abel because Abel received more favorable treatment. Abel's offering was acceptable to the Lord and Cain's wasn't. As the Bible puts it, resentment was "kindled" in Cain until he explodes. He summons his brother out into a field and kills him. Murder is the ultimate destructive manifestation of resentment.

The story is forever speculative, but an amount of time probably passed between the start of Cain's resentment to the eruption; what we call today "repression." But repression doesn't solve the problem. Repression only postpones it. Sooner or later, resentment builds, sometimes over years, and then the explosion. You cannot keep a lid on resentment. Angry feelings that accumulate over time cause pressure, and pressure builds to the point of uncontrollable behavior!

One author defines it this way: *Resentment is like a mole burrowed underground. You can't see the rascal, but you can trace its destructiveness as it plows up the lawn you've so carefully groomed. With resentment, all it takes is some memory to bring it to the surface -- to consciousness.*"

Good people relate much easier to the elder son than the younger. The older son is dutiful and thoughtful, the one who is responsible, caring, and concerned. However, over time he becomes filled with great resentment. We relate easier to the older son because we know how he feels. We, too, get tired of being responsible all the time. Every family, every couple, has someone who carries much of the moral weight. After awhile he or she just gets tired ... feels used ... and angry with other people who won't take responsibility for their actions.

Before I become too sidetracked, let me remind you that this story is about the father ... the father who must deal with both his boys. On the one hand, the father gives both sons what they need. He lets the younger son come back to the family. And he gives his older son what he needs ... reassurance when he says: "You are always with me. Everything I have is yours." Here, at this point, is where our Christian thinking must change. The father has two sons. He loves both his sons. He goes out to the two sons, and is generous to both sons.

Perhaps, because of the competitive rather than cooperative spirit of our society, the common thought is that there must be losers if there are winners. Hence, even in the Christian church, it is very difficult not to think: poor / rich, white collar / blue collar, educated / uneducated, saint / sinner, publican / Pharisee, older son / younger son, active members / inactive members, long time members / new members, members who give a lot / members who give nothing / people who worship regularly / people who are C. s and E. s (Christmas / Easter worshippers).

Jesus teaches that God's love is both/and ... not either/or. The embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older son. Jesus' love for tax collectors and sinners did not negate his love for the Pharisees and the scribes. Such is God's love! But we find it difficult not to be offended by God's grace towards some people who we have serious questions about, especially their conduct and character. However, God comes to each of us in whatever way it takes to lay claim to our life. We are not to criticize how God works. God reaches out to us anyway He can, in order that each of us may be claimed as His child. God wants us to give up for Lent any resentment we have towards others, because God knows that that resentment is causing ill health! God knows that that resentment is killing relationships! God knows that that resentment makes less our faith!

We cannot question God's love and grace for others. Our position is one of giving thanks to God for loving us despite our own shortcomings, failures and foolishness. We may have faith to move mountains; we may be disciplined in our devotion to God; we may even tithe --- but in God's eyes, this does not make us any better than anyone else. If this upsets you then you haven't fully grasped God's love and grace, nor do you understand God's claim on your life.

This parable, interestingly, does not have an ending. We are not told if the younger brother ever grew up and changed his ways, or if the older brother let go of his resentments and went into the house and joined the party. I doubt that they all lived happily ever after. Few families do! Jesus doesn't end the story because this is a story that you finish yourself. I think that most of us, I know I do, relate more readily to the older son ... that there is resentment within us ... eating at the core of our life.

And I'm betting we are the ones the Father is waiting on ... the ones whom God is begging to come in and party. Each of us takes different paths in our life and marches to our own beat. But when it comes to our faith journey, we are not "an island apart from the main." This Lent give up your resentments! For there is a God who names you, claims you, has plans for you, waits for you, invites you, and blesses you. I'm confident that God will sooner or later have you. I hope it is this Easter! Amen.