

"THE SON WHO WAS A FAKE"

St. Luke 15:11-32

Text: "But he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.'" St. Luke 15:29

The scripture we read this morning is usually called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Actually, this is a misnomer. The parable really contains the story of two sons, one who was indeed a prodigal and the other, called the Elder Brother, who stayed at home, yet was prodigal in a different way. In fact, however, the emphasis of the parable is on the father. The focus of the story is the father and how he deals with his two sons. One son is a wild, unruly boy who sets off into the world to squander his fortune in riotous living. Yet, when he repents and returns home, he finds the loving father waiting in forgiveness for him. The other son, although he has remained at home, is a self-righteous, jealous man. But again, the loving father responds with understanding to his son's bitter feelings in order to demonstrate his love for him.

Now, Jesus always told his parables within a particular historical context. So I think it would be helpful if we understood the context within which Jesus told this particular parable--or, rather, these two parallel parables. At the beginning of the 15th chapter of St. Luke we read these words, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. (here is one group) And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" (here is the second group) Here then are two groups gathered around Jesus. On the one hand imagine the poor outcasts of Jewish society gathering around this man Jesus. They desperately need to be told that they are loved and cared about. But also gathered around him are the church-goers, the people who belong to the First Presbyterian Synagogue of Jerusalem, the religious people of the city, the scribes and Pharisees. They resent the inclusion of this spiritual riffraff into the Kingdom of God and they resent the fact that Jesus is associating with them. They complain bitterly about it. It was then--speaking to the two groups around him--that Jesus tells the parable of the loving father.

The first part of the parable that we are so familiar with, the parable of the prodigal son, has to do with the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus is saying to them that though they have sinned against God--though they have taken the gifts that God gave them and misused, perverted, and abused them, that if they will return to God, they will find him a loving, forgiving father who will be delighted at their return home. I want to say to you this morning, that if you find yourself in the same sinful condition as these people, with destitute and hungry heart, God the Father is waiting for you today. Whoever you are, whatever you might have done, God is loving and forgiving and compassionate. If you will turn to him, whatever you might have done, he is the father waiting for you and who will receive you with joy and love.

The second part of the parable, the part about the Elder Brother, was spoken to the Pharisees and scribes. He is saying to them, "You are like the Elder Brother. You have always been religious and outwardly faithful to God. But," he says, "in your hearts there is something evil that puts you in a worse class than the tax collectors and sinners." Now, since most of us here this morning fall into the elder brother category, I want us to look together at the son who was a fake.

Notice in the first place he was a fake because he felt that his father should love only him. He could not bare for his brother to share his father's love. He

wanted for himself all his father had to give.

Now, in all fairness, we need to see things from the elder brother's side. Children who stay at home and don't cause trouble are often taken for granted. Often the parents seem more concerned and have more obvious affection for a prodigal child who may be breaking their hearts. Yet, we know that this was not the case here. How much the father loves the elder brother! "Son," he said, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

Have you ever felt like the elder brother? Well, most of us have. We have heard someone give a glowing testimony of how after a life of sin and vice he came to know Jesus. Everybody makes over him. Everybody talks about how great it is and how wonderful it is and the returned prodigal gets all the attention. But what about those of us who never did all those wild, wicked things? What about those of us who have lived a good, moral, upright life? Nobody makes over us! Our testimony just isn't that dramatic. And certainly we feel a twinge of resentment and jealousy. Certainly we've had a little of this right here in our own congregation. Some of our people have come into a new relationship with the Lord. They are excited and happy about it. They want to share with everybody what great things the Lord has done for them. And some of us have been affronted by it. We think or say things like, "Well, who do they think they are! Are they trying to tell us they have something we don't have? Are they trying to tell us they are better than we are? Why, I've been a member of this church for years and I'm just as good a Christian as they are--and maybe better."

Or again, have we been guilty of making God the Father a sort of Protestant, American, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon God? Just to illustrate, what is our feeling when thousands of people in some foreign country are killed in a terrible earthquake? Does it strike at our hearts? Or how about when an Asian village is bombed to rubble or some natives are lined up and shot by American soldiers? Does that hit close to home? If we are really honest, I think we have to admit that it doesn't hurt as much as we know it should. We forget sometimes that God's love is for the Black in the slums, the bum in the gutter, and for the men of every race and nation. Jesus died for all--all--but we are sometimes guilty of thinking like the elder brother, that God should love only us. After all, the Bible says, "God so loved the world...."

Notice in the second place that the elder brother was fake because he served without joy. In our text he says, "Lo, these many years I have served you..." The Greek word used here for "serve" is not the ordinary word. It is a word that comes from the Greek word "slave." In other words, he is saying, "I have worked like a slave for you." It means grudging service; unhappy service; unwilling service. It means service without any joy attached to it. Do you ever serve the Lord that way? I know I do. Sometimes I find myself doing things because I have to do them or because they are expected of me. I don't get any joy out of it and I'm sure God gives me no credit for it.

Yes, the elder brother served without joy. Recently we have started a program for older people--our VIP program. One of the things that has impressed me the most about that program is the people who are doing the work for it. They give a lot of time and effort and energy. Yet, they are really getting a kick out of doing it. They are serving with joy. Over in Hebrews, chapter 12, we are told about Jesus and the Bible says of him, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Well, the cross and the shame that Jesus endured certainly was not a pleasant thing. Yet, the Bible tells us that Jesus endured them with the joy of service. I remember reading a story once of a large family that was poor. None of the children liked the heel of the bread, but they couldn't afford to waste it. An aunt who lived with the family was a self-sacrificing, self-

righteous type of person and she would say in a self-pitying voice, "I'll eat the heel of the bread." She let everybody know what a sacrifice she was making. She served without joy. On the other hand, the mother would say with gait in her voice, "O please, let me have the other." She served her children with joy and it made all the difference in the world.

So, I would ask us elder brother types, are we serving the Lord--and are we serving him with joy? I know a lady who is known for her Bible reading, her study, her good deeds. Yet, I see in her no joy, no happy excitement about what she is doing. It's like the little girl watching people leave church one Sunday morning. She looked at the people's faces and asked, "Did somebody die?" Are we like that in our service to Jesus? I read once of a woman who had grown old and blind. She had two daughters and one week one of them would come and clean her house for her, and the next week the other would come. Each cleaned the house as well as the other, but the mother said, "It's a blessing when Janie comes to clean. She whistles and sings and hums the whole time. I can tell she does it for love and not for duty." Sometimes we are like that--serving outwardly, but underneath is a seething resentment and bitterness that eats away at our hearts. This sort of bitterness comes out in the elder brother. "You never did anything for me! You never gave me a little billy goat to barbecue so my friends and I could have a party!" And can't you see him out in the field working, yet all the time his heart is consumed with resentment, "Here I am out here working in the hot sun. Daddy doesn't appreciate me. Why doesn't he do something nice for me like give me a party for me and my friends." Some of us are like that. We serve the Lord and work in his church, yet underneath our hearts are resentful towards God. "Look how hard I'm working for the Lord. Look how much more I'm doing than others. Some people don't do a thing--they won't usher, they won't serve on a committee, they won't teach Sunday School, they won't do a thing! And God won't even do anything special for me. Why I haven't gotten anything special from God this year!"

Notice finally that the elder brother was a fake because he served with a prodigal heart. You see this story isn't about just one prodigal--it is about two prodigals. The younger brother prodigal in body. He left home, went to a far country, and really lived it up in sin until he was reduced to poverty and destitution. Yet, though his heart was prodigal, there remained in his heart something of home--something of love for his father. When he had sunk to the depths of human misery and suffering and despair, there came into his heart the remembrance of something of home, of father, of love.

Let me add an aside to you parents. Love is never wasted. It will break our hearts to see our children go out into the world and there become prodigals--prodigals who cause us grief and despair and sorrow. Yet, I think we need to remember that the love we lavish upon them is never wasted. Some day when they are caught in the depths of human misery and despair, there will come into their hearts something of home and the love they knew there. That remembered love may one day cause them to turn homeward again. No, our love is never wasted.

The second prodigal was the elder brother. He was prodigal in heart. Of the two sons perhaps he was the worst prodigal of all. He may have worked in the fields, but his heart was prodigal, full of evil things.

Notice what he says of his brother. He said to his father, "But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!" How did he know his brother had devoured his father's estate living with harlots? The fact is, he didn't. He merely projected in his heart what his brother was doing. And why? Because that is what he would have done. His body



may have been at home, but his heart was filled with evil thoughts and wicked deeds. Are we not guilty of this? We condemn in others what we have in our own hearts. If we are suspicious of others and distrustful of them and of their motives, in all likelihood it is because those things are in our hearts. We suspect others of doing what we would do under those circumstances.

Did you notice how he spoke of his brother? He said, "When this son of yours came..." He didn't say, "my brother". His prodigal heart rejected his own brother. He didn't speak of his brother as coming back, or returning home. He had written him off. His heart was bad--his heart was prodigal--he didn't want his brother to come back.

The story of the prodigal son was told for the sake of the tax collectors and sinners--for those who knew they were lost and desperately needed forgiveness and love. But the parable of the elder brother is told for you and me, the church people. It warns us that we can be sons who are fakes--fake if we think God loves only us; fake if we serve grudgingly, without joy; fake if our hearts are prodigal--filled with evilness and wickedness.

You see, we are all prodigals. It is only when we truly love God and truly love one another as brothers that the father says to us, "Son, all that is mine is yours."