



First United Church of Oak Park

Cut from the Same Cloth
Luke 15:11-32
The Rev. John Edgerton
October 13, 2019

A story from the words of Jesus, a story about what it means to be a child of God.

Once, there were two brothers, the only children of their father who oversaw a vast realm. The elder brother dutiful, the younger willful. The elder devoted and hardworking, the younger devoted only to wild-living. The elder brother would work until sundown and then be up before dawn, the first one in and the last one out—working day and night like he had something to prove. The younger brother was just waiting to be able to leave—living fast like he had something to prove. The elder brother thought he and his brother were nothing alike, that they were different as different could be.

One day, the younger brother gathered his family and said to his father: “Give me now the property that will come to me when you die.” The elder brother couldn’t believe it. This was a slap in the face—this is saying: I would be better off if you were dead, and rather than waiting around, I’m just going to live my life as if you were dead already. How’s that sound?

His father gave him what he asked for, and he departed for a distant country where he could be left to his own devices, where he could waste his days in reckless and shameful living. And his father’s eyes as the younger brother walked down the road, it was as if they looked upon one who was so lost, who was heading in the wrong direction on the wrong road and didn’t even know it.

The elder brother watched too, saying to himself, “good riddance.” As far as he was concerned, he no longer had a brother. The elder brother was now able to live just how he wished, which was to work. And that is just what he did. Every day the elder brother would do as his father asked, never disobeying. Every day he would be the last one to stop working every day, coming back to the house long after the hired hands had finished.

But the thing about being the last one to stop working—it meant that at the very end of every day, as the sun was going down, the elder brother got a few moments to himself. A few moments when he could look out over all the beautiful expanse of his father’s land and think of what might someday be. The elder brother might, if he worked hard, if he was obedient, if he was good, the elder brother might someday deserve all of it. The vast fields filled with possibility, the home large and gracious—really a mansion with many rooms—with room enough for family and guests and fellow-workers, the flocks and orchards with abundance enough that generosity was a joy and even the least always had enough. Just a moment, every day, afforded to him by hard work and obedience and goodness, a moment of thinking about how he might one day deserve it, might deserve the beautiful realm that he looked out over at evening fall.

It was on just such an evening, that the elder brother returned to the house and he found the house was all ablaze with light. There was loud music too, and the sounds of laughter and people dancing. There was the inviting wood-smoke smell of a great feast being prepared, the best cuts of meat.

The elder brother grabbed one of the hired hands who was coming out of the house, and asked him: what's going on? What's the party for?

The hired hand said to the elder brother—why, your brother! He has returned! He came back this very night—he had nothing—no suit, his family ring gone, no shoes even. But when your father saw him, he was overjoyed! As soon as he saw your brother, your father cleaned him up and dressed him in his own best suit, and put shoes on his feet, and put the family ring back on his finger and ever since then we've been having this party. He's broken out the good stuff, killed the fatted calf, spared no expense. They're in there right now celebrating.

The elder brother...when he heard this...he stood rooted to the spot for who knows how long, ignoring everyone coming and going, standing just outside the house, fuming. He stood rooted to the spot for so long that his father started wondering where he could be—even he didn't work THIS late. His father went outside, and found the elder brother there, and began to plead with him to come in—come inside, your brother who was as good as dead, is alive again, we have got him back!

And like a dam bursting, the elder brother's anger came flooding out upon his father. Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back—who has devoured your property with shameless living—you throw him this party! Have you forgotten what he did? How he said he'd be better off if you were dead? How he wanted to get far away from all of us and be left alone? Have you forgotten how he brought shame on our family—having someone like him as one of us—and how he left me here all alone to do all this work? Have you forgotten what he did?

And for what? For wine, women, and song? He doesn't deserve this. I deserve this. I'm the one who works hard, I'm the one who is obedient, I'm the one who holds it all together. But I get nothing, nothing but work, nothing but thankless do-goodery and HE, he gets this, he gets grace and understanding and peace and joy. It's as if because he is bad, you care for him more. Haven't I earned what you are so foolishly wasting on him?

The elder brother thought he and his brother were nothing alike, that they were different as different could be. But they were cut from the same cloth. They were just the same. The younger brother believed he had wasted and frittered away and lost his place in the family. And the elder brother believed he had to scrimp and save and work hard to deserve his place. How wrong they both were. And his father's eyes as he looked at the elder brother, his eyes were as if they looked upon one who was so lost, who was heading in the wrong direction on the wrong road and didn't even know it.

Son, you are always with me, and everything that is mine is yours; you are always with me and everything that is mine is yours. Look. And the elder brother looked and saw as if for the first time, the place he spent his life working on. The vast fields filled with possibility, a future that could be anything: that is, he saw hope. The home large and gracious—really a mansion with many rooms—with room enough for family and guests and fellow-workers: that is, he saw welcome. The flocks and orchards built up over long years, so that there was abundance enough that giving was a joy and even the least could always have enough. That is, he saw generosity. Everything...everything...hope and welcome and generosity—a beautiful realm—it was his to have and his to give away. It was for everyone, and it was enough.

That is, he saw grace. Grace is what his father had, grace was the realm that his father had built, grace was his inheritance. It was more than he had ever dreamed.

The elder brother cried out. This calls for a celebration! A party! Break out the good stuff! I'll kill the fatted calf, spare no expense, I'll get to work right away, this will be a celebration to remember! And as the elder brother was about to launch back in to work, he came to himself. And heard it, as if for the first time. The music, and dancing, his own home filled with the sound of laughter and joy; his brother, too, who had been dead and was alive again, there stood before him an open door.

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