

Date Preached	27-Mar-2022	Date Initiated	16-Mar-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Lent 4, Yr C ( <i>Laetare</i> )

" Then [the elder son] became angry and refused to go in. "



Today, we continue our Lenten reflection on sin and repentance. Specifically, the *selfwardness* of sin: how it relentlessly bends our spirits and souls back toward our *own* desires and our *own* ends; and, in contrast, the *Godwardness* of repentance: how, when we consciously strive to live in the love of God, we become *open ... vulnerable, even ...* to being bent or stretched or lifted toward a fuller, deeper relationship with God, in Jesus Christ; a relationship that can enfolds our whole being.

We've been using the familiar words of the General Confession as our map for this exploration. We began by looking at our sinning by THOUGHT: in particular, how we seek to judge and control the world by layering upon it more and more IFs of our own creation, rather than living in the IS of God. Next, we looked at how we sin by WORD: how in our daily discourse we murmur, prattle and shout endless words about virtually everything *except* Jesus, and, thus, sadly miss hearing Him speak through our own mouths.

Today, we turn to our sinning by DEED. Now, the sinful deeds we commit are myriad in number and variety: from the rude gesture to another driver ... to not sharing what we have ... to cultivating a hatred of another.

Today's parable of the Prodigal Son,<sup>1</sup> however, suggests to me one specific sin-in-DEED that merits some reflection. The first part of this story is quite familiar: A restless younger son demands his inheritance from his father, **right now**<sup>2</sup>; blows all of it in dissolute living; ends up a starving pauper; and, finally, slinks back to the family farm, ready to face disgrace and disdain ... only to be welcomed with open arms and the proverbial ... or, in this case, the *parabolic*<sup>3</sup> ... fatted calf. Such is the never-failing, always-forgiving nature of God's boundless love and bottomless mercy. Jesus' parable of the *younger* son is a classical, reassuring tale of sin, repentance and forgiveness, which is, no doubt, a prime reason it's one of His most well-remembered, despite its appearing only in St Luke. But Jesus doesn't end the story there, does he? The *further* account of the *older* son's angry resentment of the joy over his younger brother's homecoming is equally essential to Jesus' message.

The elder brother has done everything right: hasn't hounded his father for an early grab of *his* share of the family fortune ... hasn't forsaken *his* familial responsibilities ... hasn't dishonored *his* body (or the bodies of others) in debauched living ... hasn't exposed the family to ignominy and

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<sup>1</sup> Some commentators prefer to call it the parable of the Loving Father, as he is the character common to both halves of the narrative.

<sup>2</sup> Under prevailing Jewish law, a younger son was entitled to one-third of his father's estate. While he usually received it at his father's death, he *could* demand it during his father's lifetime. (*Harper's Bible Commentary* (1988), p 1034.)

<sup>3</sup> *I.e.*, the adjectival form of "parable"—not the stuff of Algebra II!

ridicule by *his* becoming a homeless wastrel. The elder son is a model of morality and rectitude; a paragon of clean living and steadfast commitment.<sup>4</sup>

So, what's the older brother's sin in Jesus' depiction of him? It's tempting to name jealousy or a lack of empathy: tempting, but probably not accurate.<sup>5</sup> For in this chapter of Luke,<sup>6</sup> Jesus' subject is not the cultivation of virtues or the love-of-other. Rather, He is teaching about *repentance*: our being willing to turn our hearts toward the gracious forgiveness of God, Who ever joys when we surrender control and accept the Holy Spirit's Godward steering of our lives.

Now, the working-out of repentance in the story of the prodigal younger brother is obvious: the willful, even depraved sinner who, at last, sees the light and 'returns home.' But what must the older brother repent of? A dutiful child raised in a fine family, he has learned good manners; absorbed sound values; taken up a productive profession. No doubt, he both tithes and fasts. So why does Jesus include him in this parable of repentance? How is the parable of the *prodigal* son incomplete without the complementary tale of *prudent* one?

In a word, the answer,<sup>7</sup> I believe, is *rigor*: the determined quest to preserve things just as they are, because that's the way they're *supposed* to be. The elder son has spent a lifetime learning and practicing and defending the *status quo*. He has worked out, in his own mind, how people are *supposed* to behave ... what rules are *supposed* to be followed ... and what punishments are *supposed* to be meted out to those who break them.

His sin is a grimly fixed world view that leaves no room for the always-evolving, ever-expanding love of Christ. The older brother meets changed circumstances with an unchanged heart; a warm vision of COULD-BE with a cold inventory of AS-IS; an invitation to turn with a demand to stay put. Life, for this older brother, is a pre-determined, invariable list of 'acceptable choices' or 'appropriate' options, which leave precious little room in his heart, as Jesus tells us through the father's closing words, for the mysterious movement and amazing *largesse* of God's grace.

While, on the one hand, the younger brother is called to a repentance of *return*—of honoring and being grateful for all he's received ... the *older* brother, on the other hand, is called to a repentance of *departure*—of being open to more possibilities, however far they bend or stretch him: of putting down his own measuring stick of what is good or pleasing or decorous or wholesome—a metric primly bounded by the narrow horizon of his own existence ... and entertaining the idea that, in God's wisdom and delight, God seeks to penetrate our prickly, immovable self-certainties by *surprising* us with a new way of doing or thinking about something ...

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<sup>4</sup> Although the ancient Mediterranean culture Jesus was teaching in would not have seen it this way, today we might say the elder brother is even a model of self-sacrifice: of denying (or at least delaying) the gratification of personal goals and desires in accordance with 'outmoded' cultural norms. *Query*, however, whether our modern culture's almost unthinking sanctioning of one's following every whim in the name of self-discovery or horizon-broadening isn't, in fact, the attitude that's 'outmoded,' when compared with both the balance of human history and, more importantly, the example of Christ Himself.

<sup>5</sup> What's more, we go too far if we accuse the older brother of not loving his younger sibling; or of his lamenting the prodigal's return. There is no evidence that the stay-at-home son is unkind or uncaring.

<sup>6</sup> The two parables that precede this one—the lost sheep (and the shepherd who leaves the flock, to go search for it) and the lost coin (and the woman who carefully sweeps the entire house to find it)—are of-a-piece with it.

<sup>7</sup> In truth, there are *many* answers. The elder brother may also illustrate the sin of self-pity ... and/or of intolerance ... and/or of failing to 'assent to' God's magnanimity, etc. Where I am led in this sermon, however, is to rigor and the deep urge to preserve things as they are.

by *confounding* us when Jesus shows up somewhere unexpected ... even by *shocking* us by showing us how much God loves someone whom we struggle not to hate. The older brother must relax the rigor of his commitment to responsibility, in order to celebrate the emergent joy of his irresponsible brother's homecoming.

This repentance-of-departure is especially challenging, for it doesn't ask us to give up something we *know* to be bad (but may have persisted in, nevertheless); but rather, to put down something we've always thought of as *good* and *worthy*. It doesn't call us to unburden ourselves of a shameful habit or slothful neglect; but rather, of a vice that we've always counted as a virtue; of a cost that we've always viewed as an efficiency; of a blindness that we've proudly regarded as clarity-of-vision.

And so, this week I offer a simple, reflective practice of repentance. When you have ten or fifteen quiet minutes, sit down and ask yourself, "When, in the last week ... or month ... or year, have I rejected ... or derided ... or simply ignored a new possibility – a new way of thinking or being; of doing or loving – a new acquaintance – a new opportunity or invitation – that someone's offered me or asked me to consider; and how might this self-sure preservation of the *status quo* have foreclosed God's grace? **And** ... how might I now circle back and embrace it?" For when we thoughtfully examine our lives in a way that untethers us from the strictures of self-imposed rigor, a song surely comes to God's lips: The child who once was lost has now been found ... and the banquet in heaven begins anew!



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