

SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:1-3, 11B-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 So he told them this parable:

“There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered 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. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 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.'"

MESSAGE – YOU ARE YOUR BROTHER'S KEEPER

This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

What happy words – happy words for the father - happy words for the youngest son. Maybe not so much for the elder son. It appears that whatever joy he may have felt at this reunion were tainted by bitterness and a sense of loss. A sense of being treated unfairly.

When we look a little more deeply into this tale, even though it is a story of joy, of recovery, reconciliation and reclaiming what was thought to be lost, there is plenty of potential for bitterness and resentment.

The story began with the dissatisfaction of the younger son – resentful of having to live in the shadow of his older brother, resentful of having to wait to inherit what was owed him, resentful that the life he was trying to build in that far off land was destroyed by forces outside his control. What hard luck, having a country-wide famine wipe out all his wealth.

The younger son's life had not worked out at all. Things had gotten so bad for him that he had no choice but to return in shame to his family and beg for a place in the household. The younger son had plenty to be resentful about.

The father also had cause for resentment. He had been treated disgracefully by his youngest son – essentially disowned by him – reduced to nothing more than a source of wealth. Even his eldest son, the one who stayed, seemed to be much the same as the one who left. Only, instead of asking for his inheritance up front

he was playing the long game, waiting for his father to die so that he could collect. This father had plenty to be resentful about.

And yet, when the father spotted his son in the distance, any negative emotions that he might have harbored evaporated. He ran out to embrace his boy and celebrate his return, showering him with gifts and loving him lavishly.

Likewise, when the younger son saw his father's enthusiastic welcome, any bitterness he may have had also evaporated as he settled into his father's arms.

For both these men the past, though not erased, could not spoil the present. Just as a mother disregards her labour pains once her child is placed in her arms, so too this pair forgot the old wounds and disappointments when they were reunited.

But not so the elder brother. He was angry. He refused to go into the house to greet his brother or to join in with the festivities. He wanted nothing to do with the whole mess.

'Why are you celebrating?' he asked his father. 'Don't you remember what this kid did to you? He ripped your heart out; he left us both for dead. He only cared about your money back then, and the only reason he's back now is for more money. You give him a ring and a robe. You roast the calf that you've been saving for a special occasion. Where's my ring? Where's my robe? Why don't you celebrate the fact that I never left you? I stayed faithfully by your side for years.'

I wonder how many of us can relate to this older brother. I suspect that we all can. At one point or another we have all cried 'Not fair!'

Last week's sermon dealt with how we crave order and structure – that we need the world to make sense and follow rules. Rules like *good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people*. Just desserts – getting what we deserve.

This is exactly how the elder brother was thinking. His kid brother did not deserve a welcome home party. He deserved to spend the night locked out of the house,

begging and pleading for forgiveness. He deserved to feel the rejection that he had made his father feel. Bad things should happen to bad people.

The elder brother was sure of what the younger brother deserved, and he was also sure of what he himself deserved. 'I stayed home. I worked. I obeyed. I followed the rules; I didn't give any trouble, and now I deserve a ring and robe. I deserve to be celebrated.' Good things should happen to good people.

Now don't most of us live this way? We play it safe, follow the rules, do up our seatbelts, buy the optional extended warranties, and only invest in bonds, GICs or blue chip companies. We dress as the people around us dress; we eat as they do. Generally we conform to societal and cultural norms – we are concerned with doing what is expected of us.

Where this becomes problematic is that usually our proper living or doing the right thing is motivated by fear. Fear of rejection, fear of appearing different, fear of missing out on something. Because we fear death and loss we stifle our lives – we don't live abundantly. We don't live with abandon.

Two weeks ago I spoke about submission, about the difference between submitting to someone or something because of love and compassion, and submitting because of fear. Submitting due to fear is a soul destroyer.

As we try to be good so that good things happen to us we don't recognize that by playing it safe we are limiting ourselves. We bury our talents in the ground to keep them safe. We try to ensure that our lives are stable, predictable, and routine, but once our lives become too predictable they can also become boring and unsatisfying.

That's when we start to notice good things in other people's lives and, like the elder brother in our story, we can become resentful.

We get angry at those who seem to 'skip the line,' who appear to reap what they did not sow. This plays out right here in the church.

How often do we catch ourselves thinking 'I've spent my whole life in the church; being good, following the rules, giving money. Not smoking, drinking, cursing, or

gambling. What about this other guy who spent his whole life partying, carousing, doing whatever he wanted – and now late in life he finds Jesus and suddenly he's as good as me? He gets a party?'

As a latecomer to faith I guess I'm one of those guys who gets under your skin – I'm the younger brother who squandered a good part of my life. I'm pleased to be a thorn in your side; an opportunity for growth.

The point is that we often don't think that the system is fair. This was what Jesus was getting at in his parable about the workers in which those hired at the end of the day got the same pay as those who spent all day under the sun toiling. Because it doesn't seem fair we get resentful, just as the elder brother did.

So what do we do about it? We get the feelings naturally – we can't control what comes into our minds. Do we just shove those feelings deep down inside? Pretend everything is ok?

That doesn't seem right – repressed feelings are fertile ground for resentment, so repressing or denying the feelings is not our solution.

I think there are two things to do in response. In Jesus' words - Repent and believe.

Repent means to rethink, to challenge our assumptions. In the case of the two brothers, our assumptions are that one brother was righteous while the other was foolish and self-interested.

But as we look at the reaction of the older brother we realize that he was just as self-interested as his younger sibling. His concern was not for his father, but for himself. He saw the robe and the ring being handed over, the calf being slaughtered. These things should have gone to him, and he said as much.

Just like the younger brother, the elder brother only wanted his father's wealth. The only difference is that the younger brother was bold enough to ask for it upfront.

Once we recognize that both brothers were self-interested, and therefore both undeserving of the father's wealth and love, it changes our perspective about ourselves as well.

Maybe we don't have the right to claim that we are deserving because of our dutiful service. Maybe we are just as self-serving as those we might want to condemn – but we hide it under a veneer of respectability. Perhaps our resentment is completely unfounded, and is actually a product of our pride.

Maybe we need to rethink, re-evaluate, and repent. Stop pointing the finger at the other guy. Already this is getting uncomfortable. It's about to get worse.

Following repentance is belief. Belief is not just agreeing that something is true – belief means living your life as though that thing is true. It's an action word.

If the truth that we have discovered is that we are just as self-interested as the younger brother, that we too are really only concerned about our rewards, then how would that affect the way we live our lives?

To begin with, we would realize that we have no greater claim to our father than our siblings do. In fact, we have no claim on our father at all.

If this is the case, then we are all recipients of grace. We are accepted only because of the great love of the father. No other reason. As such, we have no basis for which to harbour resentment. We can't look down our noses at anyone.

More than this, if we don't deserve our place at the table, then we are only here because someone else invited us. Each of us has our own story; we arrived here because of parents or grandparents, friends, neighbours. Some of us just walked in off the street.

But, ultimately we can trace our invitation back to God. The bible is an epic tale of God repeatedly inviting people into relationship with him.

The clearest example of course is Jesus' incarnation; God taking on human form to seek us out and extend an invitation. An invitation to eat, to rest, to abide, to become one body with him and with each other.

That invitation did not end with Jesus. Among Jesus' final words were this: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' Our mandate, our commission, is to continue to invite others to the table.

Not just people we feel are deserving, not just who we may consider to be good. Everyone. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, Jesus declared.

So, what we end up with is that rather than harbouring bitterness and resentment in our hearts, we have to do exactly the opposite to what we would prefer. We are to do what the father did. We are to run out and welcome even those who have hurt us.

We are to leave the ninety-nine to find the lost one. We are not our brother's judge; we are our brother's keeper.

So now the question becomes, who should we be running out to meet? Who are we to be helping, welcoming, and protecting?

My understanding of this parable is that the people we have to make an effort to love are exactly those people who irritate us the most. Those people who we think are the least deserving. The very people of whom we disapprove.

God's extravagant love extends to all people. Not just the good ones – there would be astonishingly few of those and I'm sure I'm not among them. God's love invites all people to share in the feast of thanksgiving – the feast of rejoicing over that which was lost but is now found.

If we are to live as witnesses of the transformation that Jesus has wrought in our lives, then our invitation also has to extend to all.

I invite you to spend some time today thinking of the people that you bear some resentment toward. Name them. Pray for them. And then listen for what God would have you do.