

*Sibling Rivalry Notwithstanding*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Texts:**  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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### Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus].<sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”<sup>3</sup> So [Jesus] told them this parable:

“There was a man who had two sons.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.<sup>17</sup> 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!’<sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.’<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.<sup>25</sup> “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.<sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.<sup>27</sup> He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’<sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’<sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.<sup>32</sup> 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.’”



Abel was a herder; Cain a farmer. Abel brought an offering of sheep from his flock; Cain brought the fruit of the ground. For some reason, the authors of Genesis tell us, God “had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering [God] had no regard.” Cain was angry – angry at God or at his brother, I’m not sure – so he took matters into his own hands; he called Abel out to the field and killed him.

There started the concept of sibling rivalry – the most notorious case of sibling rivalry in the life of humankind. Cain killed Abel. And it all began. “Where is your brother Abel?,” God asks. “I don’t know,” Cain replies, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Cain and Abel felt like they had to compete for God’s attention – and when Cain felt as if he had been slighted, had lost the competition, he did away with the one thing that he thought was blocking him from a fulfilling relationship with God. But God didn’t treat either one of the brothers differently than the other. “Why are you angry?,” God asks Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” God didn’t reject Cain. It was just that at that moment it was Abel that needed the attention. God loved Cain and Abel equally – they just didn’t realize it. And one of them ended up dead.

Sibling rivalry can be obvious or subtle. We all do it. Sometimes it’s obvious – children pushing or shoving to sit next to mom in the restaurant; brother and sister competing to be the best

at school so dad “ooh’s and aww’s” their report card more. Sometimes it’s about who buys the beige Mother’s Day or Father’s Day card. Sibling rivalry is so ingrained that we do it subconsciously not even realizing that we’ve done it.

I remember convincing myself as a teenager that I had to do more and better than my brother when I was in high school so that my parents would think I was as good as he. Was there a need to compete? No. My brother is 12 years older than I am and our parents treated us each fairly and lovingly. But I did it – I pushed myself so that my paragraph of achievements in my yearbook was longer than the list in his yearbook. My parents didn’t love either of us or my sister any more than the other one, but I thought I had to prove something. Sibling rivalry can be subtle.

Jesus parable of the Father and Two Sons tells us about sibling rivalry. It seems as if the older son is quite upset upon the younger’s return. He didn’t seem to mind that his kid brother left or that his father gave him his share of the inheritance. He didn’t seem to mind, even, that the brother wasted all he had or that he might be in a life-threatening situation. What he is incensed about is the fact that the younger son got all the attention when he came back. “You killed the fatted calf for him?”

The older son felt the need for competition. He felt as if he were more deserving than the younger one. Simply because he had stayed around for the entire time. He deserved more! “Not so,” says dad, “because you’ve always been here and I’ve always loved you. Your brother, whom I love just as much, was gone and now has come back. We *have* to celebrate. Not because he’s better, not because either of you is any better than the other one – not because either of you is more deserving – but because he’s *back*.”

Jesus tried to convince us that there is no rivalry in God’s eyes – only in our eyes. There is no competition in God’s perspective – only in ours.

It’s all about relationships – relating to one another in a way that honors how God has created us. It should not be about who wins or who gets loved more or who has the most accomplishments in his or her high school yearbook. It’s about loving oneself and one’s neighbor and God, Jesus will remind us. It’s about being true to who we are as children of God.

Remember the Lenten prayer I’ve shared with you in past weeks? “God, how do you want to express yourself through me in this congregation in this community at this time?”

Refine it to this: “God, what would you have *me do* so you can express yourself through *me* in this community at this time?” Or maybe refine it even a bit more: “God, *how* would you have me (or us) be so you can express yourself through me (or us) in this community at this time?”

Would God have us believing that we have “it” – whatever “it” is – and that whoever is on the outside of these walls has to come and find it? I don’t think so. The older brother in the parable assumed that he had all that his father wanted – strength, stability, focus, determination – and that because of that he should get the better treatment. Yet father lets the more independent son return to open arms and a joyous celebration.

If we don’t risk relating to each other in deeper and more open ways then we are not being who and what God created us for and we are not being I this community how God wants us to be. Would it not have been more in line with God’s desire for us if the older brother rejoiced at the return of his young sibling? Would it not have been more in-line for how God wants us to live for the older brother to offer the fatted calf for the party rather than complaining about it? Wouldn’t it be more in-line with God’s will for us if the younger brother went to the older brother and embraced him in love and understanding reassuring him that he knew the feelings that the older one was having and that all would be okay?

A movie from a few years ago, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, is a wonderful storybook fantasy of relationships and struggles. Joel Barish (Jim Carey) falls deeply in love with Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) but after awhile realizes that she has tired of the relationship and has visited a clinic which can erase her memories of Joel. When Joel discovers this truth, he decides that he'll have the same procedure done. But midway into the memory-erase, he decides he doesn't want to lose Clementine. So in a dream-like state he tries to move his memories of Clementine to places in his mind where the eraser can't find them. It's a complicated plot but one which leads to an interesting conclusion.

Once their respective memories are erased, they meet again – seemingly by chance although they have actually met in their memory erase procedures and have set their paths to collide once again. Throughout the movie, Clementine, an eccentric young woman who expresses her personality by changing the color of her hair from electric blue to fire engine red to tangerine orange, warns Joel that she can be an incredibly difficult person and that no doubt he will find things about her that he doesn't like – things that he'll hate – as they progress through their relationship. Several times throughout their story she tries to convince him that it would be for the best for both of them if they just didn't fall in love in the first place. Avoid all the drama and trauma of the relationship.

When she tells him that there will definitely be things that he doesn't like, he says simply, “Okay.” It's okay to not like everything about the one you love. It's okay to not be thrilled with everyone all the time. It's natural for relationships to ebb and flow, struggle and strain, under the pressure of all that happens around them.

If you don't risk you'll never relate. And what a loss that would be. Joel and Clementine are meant for each other, but they aren't compatible with each other. Thus the same cycle repeats each time they meet. They fall in love, hate each other, and decide to erase all

living memory of each other. Then they meet each other again somewhere and it happens all over again.

And that's okay. The things you dislike about another person, the movie reminds us, are never enough to bring a relationship to an end. We want to erase/forget what hurts us, even if we have to forget our fondest memories, our happiest moments, just to make life easier. This is what happens with Joel and he tries to stop these memories from disappearing once he realizes what he is losing, but each time it's too late.

One of the problems that the Church faces today is that we don't want to let in our brothers and sisters who might be different than we are. We want to let in only those who are already here. The Church, as it slowly dies, wants to keep out those who are looking for an open arms coming home party. We don't want to be our brothers and sisters keepers. Cain's rhetorical question of God resonates with us even today, “Am I my brother's, my sister's, keeper?” “Yes, you are,” says God. We are to be in communion – in relationship – maybe not “in like with” but certainly “in love with” all of our brothers and sisters.

The question that we face – the Church universal – is whether or not we can find a new understanding of relationships. Can we open ourselves – open our arms and run toward the “other” like the father runs toward his lost son – and embrace them, welcome them, love them into our life? Can we be open to those who don't look like us or walk like us or sound like us or who we think are just “different” (which, when we say it, really means “less”) than us? Is it possible that we are willing to know that we're not always going to like each other but like Joel Barish's response to Clementine, “It's okay” that we don't so long as we love each other? Maybe I'm too optimistic. Maybe I'm too naïve.

But I really do believe that we can grow. I really do believe that each one of us in the room today can grow into what God requires of us. I really do believe that our relationships one with another can grow to a deeper and wider love. I really do believe that this

congregation can grow as it opens its arms and doors to the wider world and welcomes those who might be different from us.

“Everything old has passed away,” Paul writes, “see, everything has become new.” What we are looking at – what we are living – is a new creation in God. If sibling rivalry gets in the way and we think we are winning the competition for God’s attention, then we are sorely wrong. Whenever one is separated out from all, whenever one is kept from communion with all, whenever one is pushed away or lost or swept to the margins – then the whole is not whole. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”

Let us be “in Christ” and welcome each other in new deeper and wider relationships. Let us be that new creation that God wants from and for us.

Amen.