

THE OLDER PRESBYTERIAN BROTHER
January 24, 2016 –Luke 15: 11-32 –Congregational Meeting Sunday
The Church of the Covenant

How close are you to God today? A while back I read Tim Keller's wonderful book, "The Prodigal God", which is basically a modern commentary on Jesus' story of The Prodigal Son we just read together. How often we focus only on the prodigal in this story –the son who takes his Father's inheritance, goes into a far country, squanders it in riotous living, winds up eating the slop of pigs and returns home to find the loving embrace of his father. The father in the story is always seen as a representative of the love of God, the Gospel in miniature, and the reason why God sent Jesus into the world –to retrieve the lost and perishing. But sometimes we forget the other character in the story, the older brother, the other brother, the one who never leaves home, the good and dutiful son, who has stayed by his father's side, worked hard, deserves commendation. There are three actors in this cosmic story of grace –the reprobate who disregards God's law, the loving Father, and the older brother, who is moralistic and "the good son". Are you more like the prodigal? Or are you more like the loving Father? Or are you more like the moralistic older brother? Whenever I read this story of Jesus that is the question I am asking myself. Who am I, Lord? Which of these actors am I today? How close am I to you today, Lord?

The prodigal goes off into a "far country" as the story goes. (Luke 15: 13) This is always a metaphor for being far away from God. And eventually he "came to himself" (v. 17), he awakens to the fact of how far away he has drifted from the love of his father. This is always a metaphor for a spiritual awakening in someone's life, being "born from above", having a spiritual breakthrough, realizing something about your life that obviously has been planted in your heart and mind by God Himself. So he purposes to "Arise and go to my father". (v. 18) He will get up from where he is and seek to get closer to his father. He repositions his life in close proximity to God. He rehearses what he will say to his father than will get him back into the good graces, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (v. 18) Like reading off a card of the four spiritual laws he is well practiced in what he thinks he needs to say in order to be reaccepted by his father. Where are you today in your relationship with God? Are you in a far country? Are you at a distance from the loving Father? Could you be in the lap of blessing and favor and close, intimate personal relationship but find your heart strangely at a distance from God?

We know the story. "While the prodigal was yet at a distance", his father saw him and had "compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." The father calls for the best robe to be placed on him, a ring to be placed on his finger as a sign of his connection to the father, and tells the servants to bring the fatted calf and "let us eat and make merry". "For this my son was dead and is alive again, and was lost, and is found." (v. 24) Why would you want to be at a distance from this loving FATHER?

But the older brother reacts in an interesting fashion. "He was angry and refused to go in." (v. 28) He too was at a distance from his loving father. His anger kept him at a distance. His father came to him, just as the father had come to the prodigal, but still he refused to go in. The older brother responds to the father, "Lo, all these years I have served you (some translations say "slaved for you") and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a kid..." (v. 29) And then his anger intensifies: "But when this son of yours (note he does not say "this brother of mine") came, who devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf." (v. 31) So it is clear that this moralistic, law-abiding, Bible believing older brother is equally far away from the loving father. He never left home. But nevertheless he never was with the father. He resented his service to the church. He did it joylessly out of duty and obligation. He did it to earn something –the fatted calf, the prize, the exclusive love and favor of the

loving father. He resented when someone deemed “not a good person” was included into the love of the father. He was the “good son” and because of his goodness he felt he deserved the love of the father alone. Please note, you can live in the same house as the father and still be far away from His love. Please note, you can come to church, do lots of activities, serve the Lord, be active in mission, be a pastor, do all manner of great and wonderful things, but our heart can still be far away from God. And do you know one of the signs of this? We are angry. We are angry when someone else’s prayer is answered and ours is not. We are angry when something goes not as we wish. We are angry when the church doesn’t do what we want it to do. We deserve it. We earned it. We served and slaved for you, God. So it is our right to be loved by You and to receive every blessing, and answer to every prayer that WE WANT. So you can be in church every Sunday, but you can still be the other, older brother, you can still be far away from God. So how close are we to God today?

I think most people are a mixture of prodigal, loving father and older brother. We are not one or just the other, we are various combinations of all three. But we probably have some dominant trait. We probably mostly “dwell” in one of the three categories. I mostly think I am “the older brother”. I am the one who seeks to be “the good son” who never left home. I stayed amazingly untouched by all the moral decline around me when I went away to college. I didn’t like “those kinds of people” and had a certain “moral superiority” where they were concerned. I sought to lead a good life and to be a good person. I alone would put on my sport coat and tie (in an era when no one even had a sport coat and tie in college!) and trudge off to the Allison Memorial United Methodist Church in Carlisle, to hear traditional music and a finger-wagging sermon and sit with other “good people” and come away feeling a little better about myself every Sunday. But was I close to Jesus? We’re not saved by trying to be a good person. We’re saved by grace, by the love of the loving Father, by the embrace of God. That’s what we believe as Presbyterians. But that may not be where we are in relation to God today.

Tim Keller writes in his book, “The Prodigal God” –*“The moral conformists say: “The immoral people – the people who do their own thing—are the problem with the world, and moral people are the solution. The advocates of self-discovery say: “the bigoted people –the people who say “we have the Truth” are the problem with the world and progressive people are the solution.”* No, neither is correct. The prodigal isn’t the solution and the older brother isn’t the solution. No, JESUS is the solution. Coming to The loving Father through Jesus the Son, is the solution. Keller writes: *“This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking the rules or by keeping all of them diligently”* The real question is –How close are we to God? What is our relationship with the Loving Father?

For more than 30 years the Presbyterian Church has been losing members, declining and dying. It is a sad fact that over the entire course of my ministry I have watched the church be in rapid and precipitous decline. When we lift up Jesus, as the Bible says, we will draw all people unto Him. *“If I, even I, be lifted up... I will draw all men unto myself.” (John 12: 32)*, says the Lord. But the opposite is also true. If we do not lift up Jesus, if other things are lifted above Jesus then there will not be much left of us one day. I am repenting of needing to be the “other, older brother”. I really want to give up trying to be “the good son” and to run into the embrace of the truly good son, Jesus Christ. I really do wish to lift up the Lord Jesus, who is our peace, and in whom all things hold together, and who will draw all people unto Himself. Do you not know, older brother, that the Loving Father has promised –*“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” (v. 21) Amen and Amen.*

By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!