

ATTITUDE CHECK

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 15:11-32

March 30, 2025

I begin my sermon this morning with three questions. All you need to do is raise your hand if the question applies to you. First question: **How many of you are a firstborn child or the eldest sibling?** – raise your hand. Okay. **How many of you are the youngest sibling or baby of your family?** – raise your hand. I realize that some of you who didn't raise your hands may be an only child, however, I am going to assume that most of the rest of you are somewhere in the middle children. My final question is for eldest as well as middle siblings, **how many of you felt like the rules were more lenient for the baby of the family?** In other words, they got away with more than you did! – raise your hand.

It's typical for most parents to become a little more relaxed and lenient with the addition of children. I realize it might not always work that way, but in general, many parents are more protective and demanding with their first child. After all, it's our first attempt at being parents. We don't exactly know what we are doing, but we want to do it right. We worry about everything; we sterilize everything; we call the doctor for every little sniffle and rise of temperature.

But by the time the second, third, fourth child comes along, we tend to relax a little as parents. We ease up on some of those first child worries and rules. "Oops, that fell on the floor; go ahead and eat it, it won't hurt you." "Oh, you want to stay out until midnight on a Friday, we only let your older sister stay out until 11:00p.m., but it's okay." Because parents who are extra attentive and cautious with their first child tend to loosen up with additional children, it is often true that the baby of the family gets away with more.

As a result of these basic family dynamics, researchers tell us that in general, eldest children tend to be rule followers and parent pleasers while the baby of the family tends to be less concerned about pleasing and more of a free spirit. My family fits nicely into this mold. I am the oldest of four, and my youngest brother definitely got away with more than I ever did. I am 7 years older, so by the time he got into middle school and high school I was in college and then seminary. But from what I could tell, he had a different set of rules to live by than the ones I had to live by. For one thing, he only had to watch out for and take care of himself. I had three younger siblings I was expected to keep an eye on. Not only did he have a later curfew, but I am convinced he had fewer expectations placed on him than those placed on me. But as the oldest of four, I must admit that I was not trying to get away with much of anything. It's not that I never did anything wrong, but typically I followed the rules, and did my best to achieve and please my parents.

All this talk about sibling dynamics leads us to one of the most famous eldest/youngest sibling stories in all of literature. The father in our famous story has two sons. There is the older boy who wants to please Dad. He stays at home, works on the farm, and does all that he has been taught to do. But that's

not the case with the younger boy. He is more of a free-spirit. Perhaps, he didn't get quite as much attention from his parents during those critical first years of life, or perhaps he was a little spoiled. It's not that the younger boy purposely sets out to hurt his dad, but he just doesn't feel that overwhelming need to please his father either. Apparently, he is much more interested in pleasing himself.

So, one day that younger son goes to his Dad, and he says something shocking. In fact, what he says is cruel. He says, "Dad, I want my inheritance." In other words, "Dad, I wish you were dead, but since you're not give me right now what's coming to me when you finally 'kick the bucket.'" The younger boy wants to live life on his own terms now not later. So, despite the Father's hurt, disappointment and concern for his son, he apparently realizes that his youngest son will have to learn the hard way. Good parents know that children are different. We love all our children, but we know it's also impossible to treat each child the same, because each child is different – they have different abilities, strengths, personalities and temperaments. The Father wasn't going to force his younger son to stay home and then watch him become more and more resentful and rebellious. And so, the Father gives him the money and lets him go.

Well, you know the story. That younger son takes off to see the world, to experience new things and have fun. Jesus describes what the younger son did with his inheritance by saying, "**he squandered his property in dissolute living**" (Luke 15:13). To engage in dissolute living is to not care about morals and to live in ways considered to be wicked and immoral. Each one of us hearing this parable is left to imagine exactly what such behavior might have included. Eventually, when the money is all gone, the young man ends up hungry and homeless and doing basically the most degrading thing a Jew could do, care for pigs – an animal considered to be unclean and for which their dietary laws forbid them to eat. Jesus gave this example as a way of saying that the youngest son had "hit rock bottom."

After a while, the son came to his senses, and he decided to return home and seek his father's forgiveness. As he nears home, his father sees him from a distance. With great relief and overflowing joy, his father races down the road to welcome home his lost son. Not only does he throw his arms around his son and kiss him, but he immediately dresses him in a robe and ring, which symbolize his full inclusion back into the family. And if these actions did not already reveal more love and grace than the younger son deserved, the Father also calls for the throwing of a spontaneous, big party to celebrate his lost son's return. If the story ended right there, we would all be left rejoicing in the return of a lost child.

But there's another child, and Jesus now directs our attention to the good and obedient older son who had stayed home. He was working in the field when his Father welcomed home and began throwing a party for his younger brother. As he neared the house after a long day of work, he hears "**music and dancing**" (Luke 15:25). As he learns about his brother's return and the ensuing party, the older brother becomes angry and resentful. I'm sure many of you parents remember your own children saying at one time or another, "**It's not fair!**" You treat her better than me; you love him more than me, you buy

her more than you buy me... You never killed a fatted calf and had a party like this for me." Feelings of jealousy, hurt and anger have welled up inside the older son. He had stayed home and worked hard to please Dad and make him proud. He did all the right things. Is this his reward – forced to attend a party honoring his worthless and now penniless younger brother? He is feeling unappreciated and throws a tantrum as he refuses to go to the party.

Clearly, this "Parable of the Prodigal Son" is not a parable about one son but two sons. **One son left home, and one son stayed home, but both sons failed to understand their Father's love, and both sons broke their Father's heart.** Both boys needed a major attitude adjustment.

Now some of you here today may know exactly what it is like to be the young, prodigal son. There have been things in your life that you deeply regret. There have been times when you know you made selfish and truly bad choices. You let down your parents, your spouse, your children, your friends; you let down God. But you are still God's precious child regardless of where your feet have roamed, and because of that you know that you can return to God's welcoming embrace. Perhaps you can specifically remember a time when your bad decisions led you to a place where you were sinking deeper and deeper into the muck of despair-ridden consequences, but then you found your way back into the loving and forgiving arms of your Heavenly Father. Certainly, all of us here today have regrets **"For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23)**. Each and every one of us have said and done things contrary to God's will.

However, despite some bad choices and regrets, many of us here today are more likely standing outside and looking in when it comes to the younger son. Oh, we may have strayed a little here and there, but we have not strayed very far from our Father. Like the older son, we have mostly remained in our Father's house and done what is expected – worship attendance, Bible study, financial support, serving on church committees, helping at a fellowship events, donating food to the Chagrin Falls Park Community Center, volunteering at the Cleveland Food Bank, teaching special worship or helping with Vacation Bible School.

The younger son separated himself from his Father's love by leaving home, but the older son separated himself from his Father's love even as he remained home. The greatest danger in the older son's separation was his failure to recognize his sin. After all, he was a good son in so many ways, but something was still very wrong as he allowed resentment to build up and block his receiving and sharing of love.

According to Jewish law of that day, the older son would have been entitled to most of the father's estate – likely 2/3 compared to his brother's 1/3. And yet, the older son was still resentful of what his younger brother had received and squandered. Yes, the older son stayed at home, and yet he clearly did not understand his father's love. For if he had known his father's heart, he would have felt concern for his brother's suffering, shared his father's grief, and he would have joined his father in the extending of forgiveness and the rejoicing of his lost brother's return. Apparently, the older son's years of obedience might best be described as grim duty instead of loving service.

Certainly, all of us know what it's like to do something even when our heart isn't in it. There are probably lots of days when you don't feel like going to work or school, or cooking dinner or doing laundry, but you do it. Perhaps a perfect age for illustrating this sense of grim duty would be those early teenage years. I remember my two-fold motivation for doing chores around the house – my weekly allowance and the avoidance of punishment. Perhaps you can also remember stomping around the house, a frown on your face, with a few sighs and mumbling along the way! Perhaps you, like me, accomplished your chores, but you were not particularly happy about it.

So, what is it that motivates you? Is it love, perhaps it's duty, fear of punishment, hope of recognition and reward, or the acquiring of power and wealth? There was an absence of joy in the older brother's obedience. He may have looked the part of a good son, and he was certainly good at getting the right thing done, but his actions were not rooted in love. It's so very easy to get caught in this trap. It's easy to fall into a pattern of doing what's basically right while also failing to understand the God we serve, a God who loves and forgives.

After all, we believe in a God who loves us so deeply that he was willing to suffer and die for us. This love is the main distinguishing characteristic of those who follow Jesus Christ; it is supposed to be what motivates us. Most of us here today are basically good and responsible people, we know what's expected from us at work, at school, at home, at church and in society, and we mostly do what is expected. But is it possible that we do the right things but for the wrong reasons and with the wrong attitude? Only an intimate love-relationship with God produces an obedience that reflects the heart of God. **It is not the acts we perform out of obligation, but the love that flows from us that distinguishes us as children of our Heavenly Father and followers of his son, Jesus.**

Lent is a good time to personally reflect on your relationship with God – it is a very good time to check your attitude and work on adjusting it. Let's face it, our hearts are not always in the right place – we have made selfish choices, we have passed judgment, and we have looked down on and even despised those whose lives have not measured up to ours. We have not understood the depth of our Heavenly Father's love, and we have not been as Christ-like as we often pretend.

Today, as we look to the cross that stands before us at the end of our Lenten journey, let us also look at ourselves honestly so that we may recognize those underlying attitudes that separate us from God's love and that make our obedience unworthy. And as we do that, let us be assured that our Heavenly Father is eager to embrace all his youngest, middle, and oldest sons and daughters with his extravagant, forgiving, and life-changing love. Amen.