

It's not Right!
Luke 15:1-3, 11- , II Corinthians 5:16-21
March 21, 2004

Have you ever been upset by the way certain people acted? Have you ever thought that the things they did just weren't right? Perhaps they ignored laws or customs or values you thought were important. Perhaps they've even done things to you that you felt were unfair. If so, you ought to be able to sympathize with the Pharisees and scribes as they grumbled about Jesus. And perhaps you can understand some of the characters in this surprising story about the man and his two sons. Most of us have heard the story too many times, though. We hear the beginning of it and say, oh, yes, I remember that one--I know how that turns out. We've become immune to the truly shocking things that happen. To help us see it in a fresh way. I've invited a TV announcer to come and interview the characters.

Announcer: Good morning everyone. This is Caleb, bar Jonah, with Strange thinks Considered. reporting to you from Galilee. We are here outside the home of the father who actually gave everything he had to his sons to bring you in depth coverage of the event. You there, what's your name?

Enoch: Enoch, sir, I work for the family. Don't remember seeing you around these parts before.

Announcer: Well, I just arrived from Jerusalem. What can you tell me about the people you work for?

Enoch: Well, sir. I've worked for em since I was a lad. Feel like part of the family myself. Watched both boys agrowin up. Carried them on my shoulders, taught em all they know about sheep and tending olive groves and such. The older one, Eli, was always quiet like and serious. Always careful to do the right thing. The other one, though, Adam, was always gettin into scrapes. Ran away from home when he was 8. We didn't find him until way in the night. His father was right worried, he was. The old man now, he was the best, the kindest master you could ever hope to have. And how he loved his boys! Why he'd do anything for em.

I was there, serving supper when Adam demanded that his father hand over his inheritance. You could have knocked me over with a feather. You need to understand, in these parts, you're respectful of your parents. For certain you

don't make demands of them. And this wasn't just disrespectful--it was like telling the old man he wished he was already dead. I waited for my master to tell him off, to put him in his place. But he didn't. Instead he said, "Well naturally, I've thought about which parts of the estates each of you would inherit someday. You, Eli, as the oldest, will of course get 2/3 of everything, and I've included the homeplace in your portion. So, Adam, if you want your part now. I'll go ahead divide it now." And so, right then and there he told each of them what fields, what pastures, what olive groves, what animals they would get. I thought Eli would speak up, maybe refuse to take his part, as a way of showing some sense to his brother, but he didn't. He just sat there real quiet.

Well, I thought. This is going to make for some real arguments about whose sheep are grazing on whose land, and who gets which servants. But I was wrong, because Adam went out in a few days and sold everything, and left the country. Sold everything! Land that had been in the family for centuries! Beside that, now that his father had given everything away, Adam had some responsibility to help provide for him, but he forgot all that, and just left! It just wasn't right.

Announcer: Hmmm. But I gather that's not the end of the story. Let's hear from Adam. Tell us, Adam, why did you act this way?

Adam: You can't possibly understand what it's like to live with a perfect older brother. He always did everything right. I had to watch as "Mr. Perfect:" always finished every task, always brought that approving light into my father's eyes. I tried, but I was never good enough. I was always getting into trouble. Finally, I couldn't stand it any more. I wanted to get away. I had a dream of going somewhere and doing really well, making a lot of money and coming back and showing my father that I could make something of myself.

Of course, it didn't turn out that way. I ran into these fellows who said they wanted to help me, but they kept expecting me to feed them expensive dinners and buy the wine and then they introduced me to Lilith and she wanted expensive gifts and then they suggested I try gambling to recoup my losses and before I knew it I was broke. My supposed friends disappeared and the only job I could get was with a pig farmer. Can you imagine--a pig farmer! You know, of course, that pigs are unclean. We Jews aren't to eat them, we aren't to touch their carcasses. And there I was, tromping around in the mud, feeding those creatures. I was so hungry I was tempted to eat their food. You can't get any lower than that.

And then I came to my senses and thought. "Back home, the hired servants at

least have enough to eat.” I guess my hunger had eaten up my pride, because I was ready to go back home, even as a servant. But after what I’d done, would they accept me back? I made up a little speech, and practiced it as I walked back home. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

I thought I’d stop at the well in the field near the house and wash away the mud from the pig sty and the dust from the road, but before I got to it, I looked up and here came my father, running to meet me! Running! You need to know that in our country men walk slowly, with dignity. For a man my father’s age to run is unheard of, it’s ludicrous! And then he threw his arms around me, dirty as I was and kissed me. I began my speech: “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and before you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son...” But he didn’t let me finish. And he called the servants to dress me in a fine robe and he told them to prepare the fatted calf. Can you imagine how I felt? I didn’t know if he’d even speak to me. I thought he might let me work in the fields. I even thought he might say, “If you work for awhile and prove yourself. I might consider treating you like a son again.” But no--he welcome me, literally, with open arms and threw a party for me! It wasn’t right, It wasn’t what I deserved. I was overwhelmed.

Announcer: What a surprising turn of events. Let’s see if we can get the older brother’s viewpoint. What did you think of all this, Eli?

Eli: It wasn’t right! It wasn’t fair! Think how I felt, day after day, working in the fields, day after day looking over the hills at the land that used to belong to the family before that scoundrel sold it; day after day thinking about him carousing and having a good time. And then I come home from a hard day in the fields and he’s home and father has thrown him a party! Wouldn’t you be upset? Well, I wouldn’t be a part of it. And when father came out to plead with me I did something I’d never done before--I gave him a piece of my mind. “Listen, I said. All these years I’ve worked like a slave for you and never disobeyed you and you never even gave me as much as a kid to eat with my friends. And now this son of yours who devoured your money with prostitutes has come back and you throw him a party!”

Announcer: When you put it that way it doesn’t seem fair. Perhaps we should hear from the father.

Father: I’ve never much listened to the complaint that “It isn’t right” I’ve been

more concerned about love than about being right. People have laughed at me. They've said it wasn't right for me to give my property away to my boys. But they didn't understand. The only reason the land was important was because of my boys. I love them. The only thing that really matters, the only way any of us is ever going to be happy is by having the family together. Our relationship is the only thing that has any importance. So when Adam wanted his share of the property my first thought was. "Maybe it will be a good idea. Maybe if the boys are in charge they'll work together. As they make decisions they'll grow closer." Of course that didn't happen. When Adam sold his share and left I was, of course, unhappy. Of course I missed him terribly, but my unhappiness came from knowing that he was going to be lost and miserable. I knew my son--I knew that he would never be happy apart from us. I knew the superficial life he set out for would be a kind of death for him. So when he returned, when he was restored to us the words I said were literally true: he was lost and now he's found. He was dead and now he's alive again.

But how ironic, that once Adam had moved back to the center of the family, Eli moved to the periphery. And how sad to discover that Eli hadn't understood anything. He hadn't understood that Adams' existence away from us was not an exciting adventure, but a kind of death. Even more tragic, he hadn't received the gift I gave him. Remember I divided the property--I gave each of them their portion. Of course, our culture being the way it was, and Eli being the son he was, I still had privileges--could still make decisions. But somehow Eli kept on working day after day, as if it was all still mine, as if he still had to earn his inheritance, as if it weren't already a free gift. No wonder he was bitter! And because he hadn't accepted the gift, even though we saw each other every day, even though we worked side by side, we weren't really together. Because he didn't receive my gift, he couldn't receive the close relationship that would have enriched his life. When I reminded him "everything I have is yours" I was trying to restore our relationship, to really become his father, so I could help him accept Adam as his brother.

You see, if Eli could only see that he didn't have to earn his inheritance or my love, if he could only see how much I loved him, then he could see his brother in a new way. Then he could be reconciled with his brother.

Announcer: And did Eli come to see this?

Father: What do you think?

The truth is that like the younger brother, the scribe, the Pharisee, the elder brother, and we ourselves need to be grateful that God doesn't do what is right, what is fair. God doesn't treat us with justice, but with grace and forgiveness far above what we can even imagine. And because of this we can experience a new change, a new life, a new creation. And because of this we can, if we choose, see one another truly as brothers and sisters, and because of this we can, if we choose be reconciled to one another and become agents of reconciliation.

Amen