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

**Introduction**

I don’t know about you, but being a proud first child, I’ve always been a bit leery of the Bible’s favoritism of younger siblings. Cain the older child is the first murderer. Ishmael is chased out in favor of Isaac. Esau has the birthright stolen by Jacob. Joseph gets it both ways. He’s not the first – that’s Rueben. But Rueben gets rejected for Judah. And Joseph himself still gets the first child treatment, used merely as a means to save Judah and Benjamin, suffering everything he does along the way. And it doesn’t exactly end in the Old Testament stories. James the older brother of John is the first of the 12 to be martyred already by Herod in Acts 12. While John is the disciple Jesus loved.

The same dynamic appears is quite of few of Jesus’ parables. Almost enough to make you think there is no hope for us first siblings. At least until you realize that Jesus himself is an oldest.

**Text**

Of all the biblical stories that used to be the common purchase of everyone, the Prodigal Son might be one of two or three that still are. Everyone has heard this. And there are a couple of immediate applications that are available to anyone who hears it. The first is simply the love of the Father. It is a simple story of the gospel. The Father loves you and wants you home. The second one is probably the explanation for all those eldest and youngest stories. The biblical world was always divided between the Jews and the Nations. At least after Abraham. And yet the eldest of Abraham rejects the fulfillment of the covenant. So God creates children for Abraham from the nations. Paul talks about that in Romans. With the added warnings not to get haughty. Because it is not so much a rejection of the eldest, but a making room for the youngest. The eldest as the Father would say in this parable “is always with me.”

And the old old story is always worth retelling. We all need to be reminded of Jesus and his love.

**Providence of the Father**

But Jesus’ parables are also much deeper than I think we tend to push them. We settle for the Sunday School version and never grow into our maturity. So I want to meditate with Jesus’ story on three things.

The first comes out of the complaint of the Pharisees and the Scribes and the initial part of the story. They complain, “this man receives sinners and eats with them.” That’s the complaint of the Eldest son compressed. Why are these wastes of space, these people who have blasphemed everything we stand for, welcomed at the table with the Messiah.

And what that complaint and the first part of the parable should remind us is that The Father’s providence is for everyone. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. He gives us our clothing, shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals and all I have. He richly and daily provide me with all that I need to support this body and life. And he does this out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy.

The youngest son comes to Dad and says, ‘Dad, I wish you were dead.” Well, that’s not what is recorded, but that is the effect. “Give me my inheritance.” And what does the Father do in the face of the impertinent brat? He divides the property and gives him his share. He takes that share and wastes it on hookers and blow. Sorry, “reckless living.” Yet even in a famine, after having wasted the inheritance of knowing the Father, the youngest is still provided for. It is with the unclean pigs. The new food is unappetizing. And unlike his Father, nobody gives him anything.

That is the world. The Father works on that economy of goodness and mercy. The world is cash and carry. And eventually his meager surrounding in the world strike him. Eventually we all have that moment in the pig slop. It was a lot better in my Father’s house. But the deeper truth is that the Father still provides. The Father provides for those who are always with him. The Father provides for those who have gone to a far country. Why does Jesus eat with sinners? Because the providence of God is for everyone. Jesus has come for the children of Israel, but he has also come for the Centurion and the Canaanite woman and those who were far away.

**The Way Alone**

The second thing I want to think about is how the Father accepts us. The Father accepts us on His terms. He accepts us only as sons. Only through His son.

The younger son wakes up to how much better his Father’s house was, but he’s full of the idea that he can dictate the terms of his return. There is a confession in there. “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” But I don’t think you can take this as being struck to the heart. This is not throwing himself of the mercy of the Father. This is a canny strategy. From where he is in the pig slop in a foreign land, being a servant at home is a promotion. “Father, treat me as one of you hired servants.” Let me work it.

And if we become aware of the Father’s providence, this might be our first reaction. God, let me earn it. We want to negotiate with God the terms of our living in his house. We want to control exactly want our mode of life will be. We want to be able to pay it back, or at least have a credit account and know where we are. And the Father accepts none of these.

“Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his hand. Shoes on his feat. Kill the fattened calf. Call a feast. For this is my son.”

Theres is only one way into the house of the Father. It is as a son. It is by being included in his son. The best robe being the one washed in the blood of the lamb. The Father doesn’t even hear the attempt to negotiate. Access to the household is given, only as a son. God has enough angels and servants. He doesn’t need more of those. He wants the brothers of His only son.

And it is purely the act of compassion. “a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion.” That’s our old friend *splagnizomai* – his guts were churned. And that long way was from the creation of the world. Before you were born, he knew you. His sons and daughters were sealed from before the creation of the world. And He knew our troubles. And having his guts churned, he sent his only son, to save many brothers. No payments. No negotiations. Just love. By the way of the cross.

**The eschatological feast.**

That leaves my oldest son problem. And I think what the oldest son highlights is the unstoppable nature of the Kingdom. The Father is Sovereign. The will of God is surely done. The only question is if it is going to be done amongst us as well. The feast will happen. The rejoicing over the sons.

And yet what the scene shows us is that the oldest son – even having never go to a far country – is under the same burden at the youngest. Maybe worse. He thinks his spot in the house is due to his work. “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed you command.” Maybe the youngest in his dissolution has it easier. Having wasted the providence, he knows he’s got nothing now. And if the crazy old guy wants to welcome me back this way, for now, fine. But the oldest has a complaint. “I’ve done the work, you owe me. Yet, you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate.”

But that is not how households work. Households worth the name, and the household of the Father is worth the name, run on love. “Son, all this is mine is yours.”

The Kingdom of God comes by itself. The servants will go out to all the highways and byways and the feast will be full. The entire family will be there. And it’s one that you don’t want to miss. All that was lost has been found. The only question is does the Kingdom come to us.

Do we stand outside demanding our own feast. That the Father owes us. Do we act like servants? Or do we act like sons of the house?

Is the currency moral accounting? … Or is it love?

The Kingdom comes, is it for you also?