

Luke 15:25-32

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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." '

Today's lectionary text from Matthew 21 includes a story Jesus tells
about two sons.

This sermon is not about that story.

Today is world communion, and, as churches
around the world are celebrating the sacrament
of the Lord's Supper, I've been thinking
about a different story Jesus tells about two sons,
a story often focused on one son, known as the prodigal,

but that is just as much about the other son,
the older brother of the prodigal.
you know, the one who stayed home and helped his dad,
and did all the right things.

The older son was probably not so different from the young Arthur Brooks,
who, at ten years old, had a modest goal:
to be the world's best French horn player.

He practiced constantly; he was so focused
on his music that he let other things slide.

He didn't care about academics,
and although he went to college he dropped out —
or was it kicked out? — after only a year.

That's when he hit the road with his French horn and his ambition.

For a decade or so, Brooks lived his best life.

He struggled to pay the rent, but he was having a great time.

Eventually, he followed the woman he loved to Barcelona,
and landed a job playing for the Barcelona Symphony.

But in his mid-twenties,
something about his playing began to change.

Instead of getting better, he got worse.

Looking back now, he suspects he had a torn muscle.

But at the time, it was a mystery.

He changed teachers, practiced harder,
but the decline in his playing was undeniable.

He simply couldn't hit the notes anymore.

At barely thirty years old,

Brooks had no idea where to go or what to do next.¹

The life he had prepared for was no longer available to him.

He was hopelessly lost.

Songwriter Nick Cave claims that loss is the primary experience

that binds all humans together. He writes,

“These losses are many-faceted and chronic,
both monstrous and trivial.

They are losses of dignity, losses of agency, losses of trust,
losses of spirit, losses of direction or faith, and, of course,

losses of the ones we love.”²

¹ <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/arthur-brooks-when-success-isnt-success/>

² <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/what-is-the-point-in-life/>

Loss is a universal human experience.

Luke chapter 15 is full of loss.

In this one chapter, Jesus tells three parables of loss:

a lost coin, a lost sheep, and a lost son.

And in these stories, loss does not discriminate:

it impacts a shepherd,

a woman, and a wealthy landowner.

What we all have in common is loss.

This chapter begins when a group of tax-collectors and sinners —

people considered irredeemably lost — keep coming to Jesus.

The religious leaders — the ones who worked hard

to do all the right things all the time —

find it very off putting when these lost souls seek out Jesus —

especially when Jesus receives them with open arms.

And so they exchange knowing glances,

and grumble to each other under their breath.

In response to this grumbling Jesus tells these parables

about the pain of loss and the deep and abiding joy

that comes when something — or someone — gets found.

The shepherd, the woman, the wealthy father —

each of them rejoices when what they lost is found —

and invites the whole community to join in the celebration.

But there is one character in the final parable —

the parable of the lost son — that doesn't fit the mold,

one character who **isn't** rejoicing at the end of the story:

the older son.

The son who **doesn't** squander his father's fortune

on illicit adventures in a faraway land.

The son who does all the "right" things, who works hard,

keeps his head down, never asks his father for anything.

And yet, by the end of the parable, it's clear:

the son who is lost is not the younger son who ran away,

it's the older son — the one who never left.

At age 30, Arther Brooks had to reinvent himself.

After two decades of striving to be the best French horn player
in the world, he could no longer play professionally.

So he started over. He went to college,

and then graduate school,

and ultimately earned his PhD.

He now makes a living studying what makes people happy.

And what he's learned is that after about age 65,

half of the population gets happier and the other half gets unhappier.

When Brooks first discovered this, he assumed the people

who became less happy as they aged were the ones

who hadn't achieved much, the ones who realized

their time was running short

and they hadn't achieved all they had hoped to.

But that's not what the data showed.

It turns out people who get less happy as they age

are more likely to be what Brooks calls **strivers**,

people who spend their early decades fixated on individual success

— whether climbing a professional ladder

or making a lot of money or raising high-achieving children.

This propensity toward unhappiness in the second half of life

is what Brooks calls “the striver’s curse.”

His research shows that people who are fixated on striving,

on attaining success, tend to neglect relationships,

so when they reach the second half of life they discover

they don’t have the kinds of interpersonal connections

that are a critical component of human happiness.

At the end of the parable the older son says to his father:

All these years I have been working like a slave for you...

*and when **this son of yours** came back,*

you killed the fatted calf for him.

Did you hear what he did there?

His relationship with his brother is so broken

he can’t even refer to him as “my brother” —

calling him instead, “this son of *yours*.”

The father longs to restore the brokenness between

his beloved sons, and so he gently reframes their relationship:

Son, you are always with me...

*but this **brother of yours** was lost and has been found.*

Will the older son accept his father's invitation to join the party,

even if it means seeing his brother with whom he is so angry?

Or will he get back to work trying to earn happiness

by doing the "right" thing?

We don't know.

Jesus ends the story there...leaving us to write its conclusion.

In a recent article, Father Richard Rohr reflects that

"God has always had a very hard time giving away God:

No one seems to want this gift.

We'd rather have religion, and laws, and commandments,

and obligations, and duties.

I'm sure many of us attend church out of duty,

but gathering with the Body of Christ

is supposed to be a wedding feast.

*Do you know how many times in the four Gospels eternal life is described
as a banquet, a feast, a party, a wedding,
the marriage feast of the Lamb?*

*There are fifteen different, direct allusions
to eternal life being a great, big party...*

He continues,

Jesus goes out of his way to mention [who will be at the party:]

the good and the bad alike. We don't like that either.

*We only want the good people to be there at the banquet,
assuming, of course, that we're the good people.*

Did you ever see the irony of that?

*Don't you realize that every religion thinks that they
are the ones that God likes?*

*And we end up gathering at the party with that smug certitude;
but when we do, it resembles something that very often
isn't much like a party...*

For many of us, the Body of Christ is not a party.”³

³ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/heaven-is-a-great-party-2022-08-31/>

One Sunday, a pastor preached a sermon on Psalm 23,

focusing on the line

‘you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.’

The pastor interpreted this to mean that heaven

would be a celebration where we would feast

at God’s table with our friends and our enemies.

After church, a woman approached the pastor with a look of anger

on her face. Pastor, she said, you know I respect you,

but I do not accept the message of your sermon.

There is no way I will be eating with my enemies

in God’s kingdom. That is not heaven to me.

“No,” the pastor responded, “that would be hell for you.”

Today is World Communion Sunday, when Christians all over the world

celebrate the Lord’s Supper — this great, big party

to which God has invited **all of us**.

Communion is being celebrated in every language

and with all manner of bread and cup

and with all kinds of people — children and elderly,

people with varying physical and intellectual abilities,

people who've sown some wild oats

and those who've always done the right thing.

Communion is being celebrated today with equal passion

by people in Russia and in Ukraine, by Democrats and Republicans,

by denominations that ordain women and queer people

and in churches which believe to do so would

send them straight to hell,

by people who've gone to church their whole lives and by those

who wandered in off the street this morning

for reasons they can't really explain.

They are all invited to God's party!

WE are all invited to God's party!

But, like the older brother, we have to decide:

will we show up?

Even if the sibling we cannot stand

is guaranteed to be there —

as the guest of honor?

Jonathan and Melissa Nightingale recall the night, years ago,
when they left their apartment in Toronto after a long day of work,
hungry and way too tired to make any decisions about dinner.

It was, they said,

“The kind of hungry plus tired combination

where even the question,

"what are you in the mood to eat?" is a confrontation.

It was in this state that [they] passed a chalkboard sign
in front of a restaurant [they'd] never visited.

In large letters, it said, *"Let Us Feed You."*

Now they knew chalkboard signs outside restaurants

shouldn't make you want to cry, but this one did —

so deep was the relief of someone else taking on this Herculean task.

They went inside and sat down.

A server came over and asked them three simple questions:

How hungry are you?

Do you have any food allergies?

Is there anything you don't like or don't feel like eating tonight?

And then, just like magic, dish after delicious dish
made its way to their table. Without them placing an order
or ever seeing a menu. They came in,
answered a few easy questions, and then enjoyed a feast.⁴
They were lost, and they got found...and fed!

We have all been lost,
whether to greed or addiction or striving
or certainty that our way is the only way.

We have all been lost.

But what also unites us is that we have all been claimed by God
in the waters of baptism, just like Bizzy.

Each one of us has a seat at God's table and a place card
with our name and the words, "Let me feed you."

Because we may have been lost to ourselves,
and to each other,

but none of us has ever been lost to God.

⁴ <https://mailchi.mp/08a2e81dd641/let-us-feed-you?e=dc5a8c5481>

We don't know what the older brother decides to do,
whether he accepts the invitation to join the celebration,
knowing that his brother will be there too.

We don't know if he is reconciled to his family.

What we do know is that, no matter who we are,
no matter where we've been, no matter what mistakes
we've made or how hard we've tried to do the right thing,

God invites us to the party.

All we have to do is take our place with

the rest of God's family,

and enjoy the feast.

Amen.

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