

My Three Sons

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

In case you are wondering about the title of this sermon—My Three Sons--yes, I did borrow it from the old Fred MacMurray TV show of the same name. If you remember that show, you may also remember the iconic logo at the start of each episode, that focused on three pairs of men's feet—one wearing sneakers shoes, one wearing wing tip dress shoes, and the third wearing penny loafers. The different styles of shoes were indicative of the very distinctive personalities of the three sons for which the show was named.

The Parable I just read also revolves around sons with very different characters, even though only one son—The Prodigal Son—gets top billing in this story. But the Prodigal Son would have surely been written right out of the script for any wholesome family show in the 60's like My Three Sons. This kid was a bad seed if there ever was one. He demands - not requests- demands, that his father give him his share of the property that would've come to him as his inheritance upon his father's death. Basically, he's telling his father that he can't be bothered to wait until his Dad dies in order to receive his inheritance. But that's just the beginning of a lot of really bad choices to follow.

First, he sells the land that his father gives him as his inheritance. Then he takes the money he makes on the sale and goes off to a foreign country and blows it on what the Bible politely calls "dissolute living." He might've been the Son with the sneakers in the TV show logo, because he was running as far as he could from his home life. It's worth mentioning here that by selling his birthright to traipse off to another land, this awful excuse for a son is not only putting distance between himself and his father, he is also distancing himself from his Jewish heritage, and from God. For one thing, treating his father so disrespectfully is a flagrant violation of the Commandment to honor one's father and mother. Secondly, the Jewish people believed that the land they lived on was a direct gift from God and was meant to be passed down from one generation of each family to the next. Selling your piece of the Promised Land that was God's gift to you--especially to

fund your dissolute living in a foreign country--was as much turning your back on God, as on your earthly father.

It doesn't take long for these bad choices to catch up with this wayward son. After he blows all his money, he has to hire himself out to a non- Jewish foreigner. A Gentile. For a Jew in Jesus' time--to be in servitude to a Gentile was about as low as you could sink. But this kid's freefall was not over yet. The only job he can find is taking care of pigs. Pigs were near the top of the list of animals to be avoided if you were Jewish, because they were considered unclean. Now, as if it were not bad enough that he is driven to the humiliating job of tending *pigs* for a *Gentile* -- the food he is given to live on is so insufficient that the slop he feeds the pigs starts looking pretty good to him.

That's when he knows he has hit rock bottom. That's when he realizes how good he had it when he lived at home with his father. Luke describes this as the moment when, "he came to himself." All his bad choices and dissolute living had led him, not only far from home and far from God, but far from the person God created him to be. So, he humbly heads back to where he came from, banking on the slim chance that his father might pity him enough to at least hire him as a servant.

That's when the Parable cuts from the Prodigal Son's perspective, to the Father's point of view. Despite all the Prodigal Son had done to treat his father as dead to him, the Father has been going out and gazing down the road the boy had taken when he left, in the hope of seeing him returning home. When he finally does see him off in the distance, it says that he was "filled with compassion" for this ungrateful child. Which he demonstrates by running to greet him with an embrace and a kiss. The Father has already forgiven him for what he has done wrong before the Son can even begin to make amends. And even though the Son confesses his unworthiness, the Father orders that the finest clothes from his own wardrobe, a ring and sandals be brought to reclothe the boy as a member of the family. "Get the fatted calf" he commands a servant, "let us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; He was lost and is found!"

That's where the point of view of the story shifts again. This time to the vantage point of the Elder Son. In that TV logo, he would definitely be the one with the wingtip shoes, because he was all business. Unlike his irresponsible kid brother, the Elder Son devoted himself to assisting his father in maintaining the family farm. While coming in from the fields after a hard day's labor, he discovers a big party going on at the old homestead and learns that it's a celebration of his younger sibling's return. So angry is he, that he refuses to join the festivities. So, the Father goes out to meet him, just as he had taken the initiative to go out looking for the Prodigal Son. The Elder Son vents his rage—a rage that is directed not only at his younger brother—but just as much at his Father for celebrating his return, while never once displaying a fraction of that appreciation on him, who had always been faithful and reliable.

The curtain closes on this story with the Father pleading with the Elder Son to be reconciled with his younger brother. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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." We never do find out whether or not the two Sons were ever reconciled. The parable ends with that question left hanging. Which makes sense when you remember the context of its telling.

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow **welcomes sinners and eats with them.**" ³So Jesus told them this parable.*

In the eyes of the Pharisees and scribes the Prodigal Son in the Parable was like the poster-boy for the sinners who Jesus was welcoming. Like him, they had turned their backs on their Heavenly Father in order to pursue selfish pleasures. What the respectable scribes and Pharisees *failed to see* was how much *they* resembled the Elder Son in *their refusal* to welcome prodigals like these back into the family of God's people.

But who in this parable was the Third Son? Who corresponds to the Penny Loafer Son from that My Three Sons logo? There was no Third Son *in the Parable*. The Third Son was the one who *told the Parable*. Jesus. The Son of God. Our brother.

The enduring popularity of Penny Loafers is that they can be dressed up to go with Brooks Brothers slacks or dressed down to go with Skinny Jeans. And Jesus embodied the will of his Heavenly Father, which is that scribes *and* sinners—the Pharisees *and* the faithless—are equally welcome and worth celebrating in the household of God. Just as the Prodigal was welcomed home and the Elder was welcomed to the celebration of reconciliation. Thanks to the sacrifice made for us all by God's own Son. Because, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." It is this message of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us, who are members of Christ's Church.

May we in the Church, faithfully tell the story—and live the story—of God's reconciling love for every Son and Daughter.

© 2022 Raymond Medeiros

Preached FCCW March 27, 2022