

June 26, 2016

Sermon Follow Up

“The Parable of the Prodigal Sons: Astonishing Grace and Absurd Self-Righteousness”

Luke 15:1-32

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The parable of the prodigal son (really, the parable of the prodigal *sons*) is a perennial favorite for obvious reasons. I’ve preached on it many times in the past. In these notes, I want to simply provide some supplemental thoughts to the particular slant on the parable that I took in the sermon. As I said, I think our church has some room to grow in accord with this parable, so that we can be a place where younger brothers find a gracious and transformative welcome, and older brothers join the grace party with grateful hearts. This parable shows us the radical welcoming love of God, and thus shows the radical welcoming love that should characterize the church. We want our church to be a place that lives out this parable (albeit, with a happier ending for the older brother).

The longer I pastor, the more I am driven to the conclusion that the parable of the prodigal in Luke 15 covers and explains just about everything that happens in church life. Virtually every church situation and every church member is somewhere in the story, and is represented somewhere on the spectrum of characters in the parable. Consider the cast of characters: the younger brother prideful demanding his inheritance, with a deep sense of selfish entitlement; the younger brother wasting his life in depraved activities; the younger brother coming to his senses, repenting, and coming home; the older brother’s smugness about having never left home; the older brother judging his younger brother and failing to see all the father has given him; the father welcoming home the younger brother and pleading with the older brother, so the whole family can be reconciled; etc.

Many interpreters rightly view the parable through a redemptive historical lens. The young brothers are apostate Jews (e.g., those sent away in exile, and worthy of being exiled again), such as tax collectors and prostitutes, who are finding the ministry of Jesus irresistibly attractive. The older brother represents the religious leadership in Israel (priests, Pharisees, scribes, etc.) who are repulsed by Jesus and his message of free grace (especially as it is embodied in his meals with those who have been outcasts). In the end, the Jewish religious leadership crucified Jesus because of who he ate with, so this reading of the parable certainly has much to commend to it. Jesus is obviously seeking to reconcile older and younger brother types from Israel in his new community of the church.

Alternatively, the young son could represent the Gentiles who are beginning to respond Jesus, and will do en masse in the years to come. Obviously, the Jews had a very hard time accepting them into the family God, just as the older brother in the

parable had a hard time accepting the younger brother back into the family (cf. Gal. 2:11ff). The Jews struggled to live as sons, instead acting as slaves (cf. Gal. 4:1-7). The Jews were greatly offended by the ease with which the Gentiles were streaming in, and wondering why their own obedience to Torah wasn't meriting greater blessing, or why God let Gentiles in without requiring them to jump through the hoops of Torah.

But I am most interested in how the story should function to shape the culture of the church *today*. How does the story work as an invitation to younger brother types and a rebuke to older brother types? How does this parable speak to the life of the church today? Some of us have younger brother tendencies, others of us have older brother tendencies. Perhaps we all have some of both. In some contexts, you may be an older brother; in other contexts, you may be a younger brother. No one except Jesus is perfectly balanced. No one but Jesus has perfectly obeyed the heavenly Father as a son at all times. No one has even been as *inclusive* of sinners and as *intolerant* of sin as Jesus. This parable has lessons for those who are more like the younger brother and for those who are more like the older brother – and as we embrace those lessons we become more and more like Jesus himself, living as sons and welcoming others with the same grace we have been shown. Jesus offers himself to younger and older brothers alike. He forgives the unrighteousness of the younger brother and the self-righteousness of the older brother. He makes both older and younger brothers into the image of the true Son of God – himself!

The goal of the Christian life is to be like Jesus. Christian growth is growth in Jesus-likeness or Jesusification. Grace makes us like Jesus. Like Jesus, we learn to obey as sons rather than as slaves. Like Jesus, we learn to invite sinners, to welcome prodigals home. We are reconciled horizontally and vertically, to both our father and our brothers.

Some of us, like the younger brother, have made a mess of things through unwise decisions, bad habits, and sinful patterns. We've just about wrecked our lives and need a fresh start. The problem is that in this position, we often think we're too far gone. How could God ever accept me after I looked at porn, slept with my boyfriend, drank too much at that party, etc. In this position, we often feel like we could never be worthy of the Father's fellowship or the Savior's friendship. At most, we hope to be slaves. This story is good news for you! As Flannery O'Connor said, the whole ministry of the church is sinner. In other words the whole operation of the church is FOR YOU! The gospel is for sinners; it addresses none but those who know they are wretched and broken. Baptism is for sinners; baptism is a washing, and as a washing it presupposes our dirtiness. Communion is for sinners; it is the Father's weekly party for returning prodigals, though instead of eating the fattened calf, we feast upon the Passover Lamb. Absolution is for sinners; we hear a word of promise and love to bring us needed comfort and assurance. The only qualification for living in the Father's house is that you admit your need and that you rest in Christ.

To those with older brother tendencies: Recognize that your smugness and self-righteousness is just as obnoxious to God as the sins of the prodigal. Your sins may be more subtle, but they are just as big of a problem. Your sins may be harder to identify because they are disguised as a desire to be good and do good, but they just makes them more dangerous. Your “good works” can stand between you and God just as much as your flagrant sins. If you are an older brother type, recognize your need for the same radical grace extended to others. Do not be scandalized by the grace of God given to greater sinners than you. Face the truth squarely: But for the grace of God you would be no different. If you acknowledge that the grace of God is your only hope, how can you condemn and look down upon those in the church who struggle? You must guard against your inner Pharisee; do not let your inner Pharisee come out and play! Note that Luke 15 opens with the Pharisees grumbling because Jesus eats and drinks with sinners; it closes with the older brother grumbling because his father eats and drinks with a sinner. One pastor has said that while we all like having Psalm 51 in our Bibles, many of do not like being in church with sinners who actually need it! Older brothers types, like Pharisees, are scandalized by grace that welcomes sinners to come as they are. Pharisees looked for excuses to *not* love others – and those excuses were always easy to find. Pharisees see hatred as the fulfillment of the law. Pharisees prove their righteousness by being indignant at all the right things and disgusted by all the right people. Pharisees condemned others as a way of justifying themselves; we can condemn others as a way of making ourselves feel more righteous. Pharisees are “holier than thou” – a phrase that comes out of Isaiah 65, where it is a posture plainly described as demonic.

The father says to older brother types, “Come join the party!” Join Jesus in rolling out the red carpet for sinners. Join the extravagant welcome, join in showing the astonishing grace of God, join in befriending and brothering prodigals. All the Father has is yours! You lack no good thing. Rejoice in the grace that has been lavished on you. Make your life and your table practices a reflection of the welcoming grace of the gospel. Know that all your goodness is of grace.

Sadly many traditional churches have fostered elder brother cultures. Our elder brotherishness is invisible to us, but it’s there. Many churches that are traditional in theology and ethics have a hard time welcoming sinners. They tend to become very homogenous “theology clubs” where those who are not already “up to speed” (often including not only theological convictions, but also particular views on politics, dress, educational methodology, diet, etc.) have a very hard time finding an open door. When new Christians enter the church, they inevitably track in dirt; Christian maturation does not happen all at once, so we must be patient. Will we be? When prodigals come home, they bring all kinds of baggage with them; this upsets those with older brotherish tendencies. Can we bear with them and receive them back as brothers? While we are never to become indifferent to sin, we most certainly should share in the Father’s welcoming, patient, and gracious love. We need not try to be “holier than God” (cf. the real original context of this phrase in Isa. 65:5).

Older brother types need to remember the Father's love is infinite. His love for wayward sons does not come at the expense of his love for those who never left home. He has more than enough to go around. Love for one son does not subtract for his love for the other son. Henri Nouwen's words are fitting. Nouwen's book on the parable in Luke 15 was inspired largely by Rembrandt's painting of the parable. Here Nouwen reflects on his own "older brother" tendencies:

The lostness of the resentful "saint" is so hard to reach precisely because it is so closely wedded to the desire to be good and virtuous. I know, from my own life, how diligently I have tried to be good, acceptable, likable, and a worthy example for others. There was always the conscious effort to avoid pitfalls of sin and the constant fear of giving in to temptation. But with all of that there came a seriousness, a moralistic intensity-and even a touch of fanaticism-that made it increasingly difficult to feel at home in my Father's house. I became less free, less spontaneous, less playful, and others came to see me more and more as a somewhat "heavy" person.

Note that as Nouwen became more and more of an older brother, he actually cut himself off not only from his father, but from his church family (especially the younger brothers). He enjoyed life (= the gifts of his Father) less and less. He got less joyful and more somber. Repenting of older brother tendencies led to an increase in joy and freedom, and an ever widening circle of friendship.

At a recent conference we both spoke at, Garry Vanderveen did session attacking overly idealistic, ideological churches. He explained how his own church had some "older brother tendencies" (my language, not his) that needed to be eradicated so the church could become more missional. The audio can be found here: <http://www.reformationcovenant.org/sermon.aspx?id=2826>. I especially like the use of Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, a favorite book of mine.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer attacks the notion of a "dream church" he is really attacking our tendency to want a church full of fellow older brothers (people just like us, of course), with no "problem people":

Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idolized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands set up by their own law, and judge one another and God accordingly. It is not we who build.

Christ builds the church. Whoever is mindful to build the church is surely well on the way to destroying it, for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess he builds. We must proclaim, he builds. We must pray to him, and he will build. We do not know his plan. We cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are the times of collapse are for him the great times of construction. It may be that the times which from a human point are great times for the church are times when it's pulled down. It is a great comfort which Jesus gives to his church. You confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is not your providence. Do what is given to you, and do it well, and you will have done enough.... Live together in the forgiveness of your sins. Forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.

Again, Bonhoeffer:

It is much easier for me to imagine a praying murderer, a praying prostitute, than a vain person praying.

And again:

Happy are they who have reached the end of the road we seek to tread, who are astonished to discover the by no means self-evident truth that grace is costly just because it is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Happy are the simple followers of Jesus Christ who have been overcome by his grace, and are able to sing the praises of the all-sufficient grace of Christ with humbleness of heart. Happy are they who, knowing that grace, can live in the world without being of it, who, by following Jesus Christ, are so assured of their heavenly citizenship that they are truly free to live their lives in this world. Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship. Happy are they who have become Christians in this sense of the word. For them the world of grace has proved a fount of mercy.

Calvin with words of encouragement to prodigals:

The Lord willingly and freely reveals himself in his Christ. For in Christ, he offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depend upon him, and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him. This, indeed, is that secret and hidden philosophy which cannot be wrested from syllogisms. But they whose eyes God has opened surely learnt it by heart, that in his light they may see light.

My graduate school professor, J. Budziszewski, under the pen name Theophilus, wrote this beautiful and provocative discussion about the depth and breadth of God's forgiveness – good news for prodigals indeed (<http://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/faith-in-life/how-do-i-share-my-faith/the-failure-of-theophilus>):

I haven't seen Clay for years, but despite my poor memory for names and faces I'm not likely to forget him. Late 'twenties, returned college dropout, determined to do better the second time around. Comfortable with friends, uncomfortable with classmates. Heavy guy. Slight limp. Looked like he'd had some hard knocks. Spoke apologetically but intelligently in class. Quiet voice with gravelly edges.

I liked him. He was also my greatest failure. We were two weeks into the semester when he showed up at my office.

"Professor, I gotta talk with you."

I waved him in, wondering at the melodrama. "What do we gotta talk about?"

He sat down on the chair in the corner, by my desk. "I gotta tell you that I'm getting scared."

Was he putting me on? I asked him, "Why are you getting scared?"

"Because you're scaring me. See? I'm shaking."

He held out his hand, and sure enough, it was trembling. There are lots of things that can cause a hand to tremble. I could picture Clay shaking from a hangover, or not enough sleep. But he said that he was scared.

"How am I scaring you?"

He replied, "It's Aristotle."

"How is Aristotle scaring you?"

"In this book of his he keeps talking about virtue."

I lifted an eyebrow. "So?"

"It's making me realize that I haven't led a virtuous life."

As I realized that he was on the level, the truth of the moment sank into me. But you have to know something about Aristotle to understand what passed through my mind.

Wisest of the pagans, Aristotle did teach about virtue. Without courage, justice, frankness, self-control and all the rest of the moral excellences, he said that no one can be happy in the full sense of the term. If you hadn't led a virtuous life and weren't happy, and then you read Aristotle and realized that he was right, you might well be depressed about all the years that you had wasted. But you wouldn't be afraid. Aristotle would merely tell you to start learning virtue. As wise as a pagan could be, yet he knew nothing about "working out your salvation in fear and trembling." For all his wisdom in other matters, he didn't know God from a hatstand.

Could I have been the cause of Clay's fear? Scripture says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I do tell my students that I'm Christian; it's my

custom to make mention of the fact on the first day of the semester because they ought to know where their teachers are coming from. But this semester I hadn't said a word about my faith. On the first day, I just forgot, and another suitable moment had never come.

So it seemed that Clay was right. The trigger for his fear wasn't my faith, and it wasn't me. It was Aristotle. This amazed me. The gospel of John teaches that the Holy Spirit came to bring the world conviction of guilt concerning sin and righteousness and judgment — but I had never thought He might use a pagan to do it.

Around this time I began to tremble myself. Not in my hands. In my heart. Clay was waiting for an answer. I hesitated. He wasn't a former student; he was under my authority now, this very semester, in this very course. I had to be sure that he wouldn't feel pressure to agree with me just because I was his teacher.

"Are you asking me how Aristotle would advise you to live?"

"No. I understand that. I'm telling you that I'm scared."

"I can speak about that, but not as your teacher. I can only do it from the perspective of my faith."

"Would you do that?"

"Are you giving me permission to speak man-to-man?"

"Yes. That's what I want you to do."

"All right. Look." I made as though I were lifting something from my head.

"I'm taking off my professor hat. Nothing I say here represents Post-Everything State University. Nothing you say here affects your standing in the course. You're free to say anything you want."

"I want you to speak from your faith."

I looked at him a moment longer. "Clay, I think you're experiencing what the New Testament calls the conviction of sin."

He took in a breath and let it out. "That must be it."

"Because I said so?"

"No, because it fits. You don't have any idea. I've done a lot of bad things."

"Everyone has. Paul says 'All men sin and fall short of the glory of God.'"

"Not like me."

"Just like you. Has anyone ever explained the Gospel to you?"

"I don't think so."

"Gospel means Good News. The Gospel is the message of Christianity. The Bad News you know already — that's why you're scared. We make a mess of things. It's not God's fault — He didn't make us that way — but we've been rebelling against Him from the beginning. We're guilty, and we're broken."

"That's the Bad News?"

"That and one other thing. We can't forgive ourselves and we can't fix ourselves."

"What's the Good News?"

"God offers to forgive us and fix us and bring us back to Him. He can do this because He's taken the heat for us already. That's what the Cross is all about."

"I know that Jesus died on the Cross and that he was supposed to have risen again, but I never understood why."

"When Jesus was suffering on the Cross, He was taking the burden of our brokenness, our guilt, and our separation from God on Himself. That's why I said he took the heat for us. And then He arose from death to new life. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Clay said. I went on.

"The Gospel — the Good News — is that if only we believe what He did and trust him as Savior and Lord — that means as Rescuer and Boss — then in some way, what He did counts just as though we had done it ourselves. He died on the Cross, and we die to our sinful selves through Him. He rose again, and we rise to a new life through Him. So if we turn to Him, we don't have to be scared any more."

I paused. "Do you believe all this?"

Clay said "Yes."

"Dear God," I thought, "the fruit is ripe and dropping off the tree."

I asked, "Then do you understand what you have to do?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to do it?"

After a few moments of silence, Clay said, "No."

Inwardly I was staggered. How could you believe it and not want to do it? The words of James came back to me: "Even the demons believe — and shudder."

"Why don't you, Clay?"

"I believe what you said, Professor Theophilus. But God couldn't forgive me."

"Why are you different than other people?"

"You don't know what I've done."

"There is nothing God can't forgive, if only the person turns away from what he has done and turns to Christ instead."

"Professor Theophilus, that's easy for you to say. You say it because you haven't lived the way I have. You're a good man."

"That's not true. On my own I'm a sinful man. If you see any good in me, it's only because the power of Christ has been healing me. I may not sin so often or so obviously as I used to, but you didn't know me before I knew Him, and you don't really know me now."

"No, you're a good man," he persisted. "You're probably married and have kids."

I conceded that this was true.

"I just live with a woman," he said.

"Jesus forgave thieves and prostitutes," I said.

His voice dropped to a murmur. "But there have been — abortions. And other things."

"I was a wreck before turning to Christ," I replied. "Just through my teaching, I'm probably responsible for more abortions than you are. If I can be forgiven, you can."

"No. I'm not good enough to be forgiven."

I saw that he was leading me in circles. This was when I should have prayed for help, but I didn't. Instead I tried to redirect the conversation myself. I said good things. They just weren't the right things.

"When you say that," I asked, "aren't you missing the point of forgiveness?"

"How?"

"It's because we aren't good enough that we need to be forgiven in the first place. The idea of being good enough to be forgiven gets it backwards. Forgiveness can't be earned."

"You mean it's like a gift?"

"I mean it is a gift."

He chewed on the idea. "I see that," he said, "but I'm too bad to be forgiven. God can forgive other people, but I'm beyond the limit."

"Clay," I said, "there's something fishy here. You want me to think that God's standards are too high for you, and it's true that we don't reach them; that's why we need His forgiveness. But when you say you're too sinful to be forgiven, aren't you really saying that God's standards are too low for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean He's willing to forgive you, but you won't let Him — as though your standards were higher than His. Believe me, Clay, you can't be more holy than God is."

He said nothing.

"Besides, God Himself says He is ready to forgive you. You said a few minutes ago that you believed it. Have you changed your mind already?"

"No. But I'm different. He didn't mean me."

I shot my last bolt. "This idea of yours that everyone can be forgiven except you — isn't it just pride? It's as though you were the King of Sinners, as though your power to sin were greater than His power to forgive. He paid the ultimate price, but for you alone it wasn't enough. Do you see what an insult that is to Him?"

Finally Clay spoke, but only to return to an earlier point in the conversation.

"I'm not virtuous like you are, Professor Theophilus. God can't forgive me."

I knew he was stonewalling. I think he knew it too. We spoke for a few minutes more. He thanked me for talking with him, then left.

That was eight years ago. I used to bump into him around campus. We'd always stop and chat, but not about God.

I know what I should have said to him that day. In prayer afterward, God made it obvious to me. Being too sinful to be forgiven was just Clay's pretense. He didn't really think he couldn't be forgiven; the real issue was

that he didn't want to be. It would have required giving up his sins, and allowing God to change him.

But I should have been praying that prayer while the conversation was still going on.

I've learned to be a more prayerful witness. And God has forgiven me. But I pray that He will stir up Clay to seek a better witness than I was.

I wonder whether Clay still uses his guilt as a barrier against unwanted mercy. I wonder if he still finds security in being scared.

And I ask God to show him the grace that He once showed me.

Isaiah 65:1ff was our OT text. It's a very interesting text to read in conjunction with the trilogy of parables in Luke 15. First, there is the obvious point that in both Isaiah 65 and Luke 15, the Lord does the seeking. The sheep doesn't seek the shepherd; the shepherd seeks the lost sheep. The coin does not seek its owner; the woman seeks the missing coin. And the prodigal finds that as he heads towards home that his father has been out looking for him; the father is more eager to find his son than his son is to be found. In the Isaiah text, the Lord is found by those who did not seek him...which means he sought them out. Isaiah 65:1 may be especially referring to Gentiles (cf. Rom. 10:20-1; also Eph. 2:11ff) – but, then, the Gentiles themselves are paradigmatic prodigals, having deserted the living God for pagan idols. Isaiah 65:1 describes the Lord offering himself freely to people who do not seek him – a picture of pure grace, as God goes after those who are given over to the worship of false gods (65:3-7).

But while Gentiles may be in view in Isaiah 65:1-2, it is interesting how other features of the passage fit the Jews who rejected Jesus. The Pharisees and other Jewish leaders really believe they are holier than Jesus (65:5) – after all, Jesus eats and drinks with sinners while they keep themselves from being defiled. Jesus violates their norms and standards of holiness; he will not get onboard with their separatist program, but instead directly challenges it. As N. T. Wright has pointed out, in the end Jesus got crucified for eating and drinking with all the wrong people. He announced the kingdom's inbreaking – but then celebrated the kingdom with the wrong kinds of folks. But according to the prophet, the Jewish leadership's claim to be "holier than thou" – too holy for Jesus! – shows they were actually in the grip of demonic and idolatrous forces.

Isaiah 65:4-5 seems to also be in the background of the story in Mark 5:1-20. You have a mixed region, polluted by idols (whatever Jews lived in the Decapolis region were undoubtedly compromised). You have pigs (cf. Isaiah 65:4). And you have people who want Jesus/God to go away – as if they were too holy for him (Isaiah 65:5). The demon possessed man did not seek out Jesus but was found by him, and indeed becomes a new creation by the end of the story (cf. Isaiah 65:17ff).

What does it mean for a church to be a place where it is “safe” to be a sinner? It means it is a place where sinners can be given grace and forgiveness. It is a place where sinners can be received, where they can be given encouragement. Yes, they will also be given wisdom/counsel/instruction, leading to repentance. But it will come with gentleness and patience from those who know, “but for the grace of God...” (Gal. 6:1-2). The kindness of God leads to repentance (Rom. 2), and if we want to lead others to repentance, we must be kind as well. Because the church is a safe place for sinners, it is a place where we can be honest about sin.

We should never sympathize with sin, but we should sympathize (or empathize) with sinners. Again, we know, “but for the grace of God...” This is why we can only “correct after we connect.” We can only steer those who are wandering back to the right path with gentleness borne of humility (cf. Gal. 6).

The church should be a safe place for sinners. Not a safe place for sin – but for sinners. The church should be a place where those who are struggling can be free to struggle. “Be kind to everyone you meet, for everyone has lived a hard life” is a saying that traces back to ancient times. Even in the case of people who seem to have it all together and who seem to catch all the breaks, if you get to know their stories, you will find they have faced significant challenges along the way. No life is lived without obstacles. Sometimes these obstacles are due to our own sin, sometimes the sin of others, sometimes issues that are beyond our control (economic or natural disaster, health crisis, mental illness, etc.). But we all will face hard times, sooner or later. Such is life in a fallen world. This means we need to be gracious to one another.

For example, when it comes to poor, we often (rightly) put an emphasis on helping only the “deserving” or “worthy” poor because we do not want to subsidize laziness and other forms of immorality. Fair enough. But there are some ways of pressing what it means to be “worthy” that basically make any kind of mercy ministry impossible – all while providing the church an excuse and a rationalization for not being generous. It’s hard to see how this isn’t self-serving. The reality is it is impossible to bear other’s burdens without becoming burdened ourselves. It is never as easy to help people as we’d like. And when we do help people, we are helping people who are sinners and who therefore never totally blameless for their condition. But however much we think a person’s overall life situation is their own fault, we still need to be gracious and compassionate. The Lord has been compassionate to us, and if we have not made a mess of things, it is very likely because he has put people in our lives to teach us the skills and disciplines we need to succeed. There’s an old saying to live by: “God meets us where we are, not where we should have been.” We should do the same with others.

Here's another example: If a church's music selections are always happy, upbeat, cheerful, etc., it creates the impression that any Christian who is not smiling and rejoicing all the time is somehow coming up short. But the Christian life is not a straight upward ascent. Just look at the psalter. It is full of lament, times when the psalmist faced doubt and depression and anxiety, etc. These aspects of the Christian life should be included in the church's hymnody or else we are creating a false picture of what the Christian life is really like. I have heard stories of people who in a time of grieving actually stayed away from church because their congregation only sang upbeat music and it simply didn't fit what this person was experiencing in life. They needed space to grieve and lament and (sadly!) their church was not a place for that.

The church has to have space for those who are sad, fearful, anxious, depressed, doubting. There may sin involved in each of these emotional states (just as sin can be involved in our joy), but the church should not make people feel their lives are somehow sub-Christian just because they are going through hard times.

Older brother types are often actually more like the younger brother types than they'd like to admit, they are just better at image management. They are able to hide their struggles and fears better. We need to be honest about the fact that the Christian life is often hard, and those challenges do not necessarily mean we are doing something wrong.

I did not point this out in the sermon, but in a culture of rampant victimization, it needs to be said: Just because you make someone feel guilty, or judged, or ashamed, does not necessarily mean you have played the role of the older brother. Sometime, saying what needs to be said, even in a wise and winsome way, is going to drive someone away. That's not your fault. Sometimes, you don't even have to say anything – just your godly example is enough to make someone else feel unworthy or inferior or ashamed. Yes, we should do all we can to lovingly reach out to folks, and to speak truth into their lives with humility. But, no, people are not always going to be receptive. Someone might accuse you of pride falsely; they might accuse you of judgmentalism when you have only spoken what had to be said, straight from Scripture. In such cases, the one making the accusation actually becomes the angry older brother.

Why did the Pharisees misunderstand Jesus' ministry? Flannery O'Connor explains: "The operation of the Church is entirely set up for the sinner; which creates much misunderstanding among the smug." The Pharisees were smug; therefore, they did not get what Jesus was up to. He set up his ministry to reach the weak, the sinful, the broken, the empty. Because the Pharisees were so sure they right (and righteous),

because they were strong and full of themselves, because they considered themselves full and whole, they were blind to what Jesus was really up to.

Tax collectors and prostitutes (= younger brothers) entered the kingdom of God before scribes and Pharisees (= older brothers). Why? Because the way in is admitted you deserve to be on the outside. The way to righteousness is admitting you are a sinner. The way to strength and glory is admitted weakness and shame. It is easier for the unrighteous to be forgiven than the self-righteous.

Luke 15 provides an interesting take on the problem of evil (theodicy). Why did God let Adam fall in the first place? Often we answer this question in terms of the “grand demonstration” (cf. Jay Adams). The fall ultimately allows God to reveal more fully who he is, in mercy and judgment. Or, as I’ve put it (following Chesterton), every good story has to have a bad man. As the Ultimate Storyteller, God can weave together a better narrative if it has some dark threads in the plotline. But Luke 15:7, 10 suggest God allowed the fall because he actually gets more joy in granting repentance and forgiveness than in maintaining righteousness. There is more joy in heaven over an Adam who falls and repents than over an Adam who never fell at all.

I do not know how literally to take the statement in 15:7, but if nothing else, it shows God absolutely delights from the depths of his heart to show grace to needy sinners. God is most joyful when he is forgiving. Somehow, God finds more pleasure in forgiving disobedience than in obedience itself. (How odd is that?)

Tim Keller with a very good reminder that younger brothers can flip into older brothers when they judge their judges:

The fastest way to become a Pharisee is to hate/judge Pharisees.

While we would all reject the prosperity gospel, how often do we fall into a functional prosperity theology that looks for some kind of one to one correspondence between sin and suffering and between righteousness and blessing? I have heard many Reformed folk who ought to know better raise the question of what kind of sin must have been committed as soon as they hear of someone who has fallen into depression, or had a child act out (especially if it’s a teenager), or gotten an illness, or had some other tragedy. It is true there is a broad connection between obedience and prosperity, and sin and suffering, as Proverbs shows. And, yes, God does use trials to teach us important lessons. But the links

between sin and suffering are almost always too inscrutable for us to make any direct connections, and often it is very foolish to do so (cf. Jn. 9). We know that God's providence is messy and we cannot read someone's spiritual state off of their current circumstances. Snap judgments are almost always superficial. This is an older brother tendency we need to wholeheartedly reject.

A typical older brother sin is gossip. Why? Many reasons, but sometimes it is because the older brother takes some kind of perverse delight in the sin (and consequent suffering) of the younger brother. The sin of another makes him feel better about himself – and what better way to enjoy one's superior standing than to share the struggles or sins of the younger brother with others? Older brother types have a tendency to kick folks when they're down rather than showing compassion. They take a "you're getting what you deserve" approach to those who suffer.

A key to breaking free from "older brotherish" culture in the church is creating an environment where pains and struggles can be shared. There has to be trust and transparency. There has to be an ethos where we are fine with people who are not "doing fine" (for a parody, see here: <http://babylonbee.com/news/report-every-single-person-church-fine/>).

William Willimon was a big influence on my sermon, especially the opening (he reminded me of the Annie Dillard story). Tim Keller's book *Prodigal God*, is certainly one of the important books on the parable. I quoted a bit of Nouwen; his book is certainly worth reading.