

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Ralph Osborne for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C
March 14, 2010 at St. Thomas Church, Menasha, Wisconsin
[Joshua 5:9-12](#) | [Psalm 32](#) | [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#) | [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

I don't remember the exact year, but it was about 35 years ago. I do remember the afternoon and the feelings I had. It was at a family gathering and it had been going on for several hours by then. A family member came up to me and said I better apologize to my aunt, she was very angry with me. This was not the nice aunt that many of you met on my first Sunday here. I can almost remember gulping. What had I done? I couldn't remember for the life of me if I had done anything, but I knew that it didn't matter. I'm sure I asked the family member who told me my aunt was angry, what it was about. I finally learned she was mad because I hadn't greeted her when I arrived at the party. It's hard, so many years later to describe how bad it was for her to be angry with you. But it was. For her, she put more value on being right than on relationships. Her interpretation of my actions, or lack thereof, was more important than her relationship with me.

Is there a bible story more well known than the story of the Prodigal Son? It captures our hearts for so many reasons. We are drawn into the story, seeing ourselves as the son, the father and even the older brother. It is a parable that remains new, no matter how old it is or how old we are. We typically focus on the rebellious son, or the loving father. I want us to leave a little room for the older brother today.

It starts off with Jesus being challenged by the truly religious and spiritual ones. They didn't like how he was acting. He was hanging out with sinners and not only that, he was eating with them. He wasn't just giving them a hand-out or trying to teach them so they would start to live a better life, he was enjoying their company! When Jesus did his good stuff, like healing and forgiving, he always got a hard time for it, except for from the folks he healed. So, here is what they said about him, "he welcomes sinners and eats with them?"

There was no answer to that, it was true. Instead of trying to teach them the truth by going over the data, trying to prove how gracious God is, he told them a parable, a story to show them the truth. A man had two sons. One of them was the good one and the other was the young rebel. The young rebel had had it with living the boring life at home and asked for his death benefit in advance of his dad's death. Dad gave it. Young son goes off and blows it all. He had valued his rights more than his relationships. He ends up broke and friendless. He ends up in shame in his own eyes, but he comes to himself. It would be so much better at home. Even dad's servants have it better. I'm dying of hunger. I'll go and tell my dad I'm sorry.

We all know that he heads home. Dad's radar must have been on, because he sees him in the distance and runs out to meet him. I wonder where mom is? She is not mentioned in the story. You know her heart was broken when her son left the safety of home for all the wrong reasons. Was it mom that sensed a change and encouraged her husband to look out the window toward the South? Dad did go out to meet the son and before the son could get a word out, dad put his arms around him and kissed him. Welcome home. The son confesses just in case, but the dad seems to ignore him. Get the special robe, get the ring and put new sandals on his feet, his are worn out. It's party time! Dad did not separate from the son like the son did from the father. The relationship was more important than being right.

Now the older brother, the one that none of us are like, was coming in from working in the field. He hears the celebration and asks what's up. "Your brother's home!" is what he hears. Immediately he knows what has happened. Dad forgave him. He still doesn't deserve it, but dad

forgave him. He knows there wasn't an adequate confession. He knows his brother hasn't paid his dues. He knows his brother has no right to come home. So, one more time, he tries to teach his father. Dad, you know better than this. You can't just let him come home. There have to be better rules. I have served you faithfully all these years and haven't asked you for anything. Yet you give him all this and you haven't given me anything. The brother separated from the brother like the son separated from the father.

Can you hear dad sigh? Son, son, don't you know? Your brother is home. What can matter more than that to me? I love you and I always have. All that I have is yours. We have to celebrate though, your brother was dead and now he is alive. You are valuing your rights more than your relationship.

Here the story ends. It has been told to the religiously correct. They are the elder brother. They don't like Jesus hanging out and enjoying the company of those prodigal sons. There is a transition that often happens in the church. Most of us come into the church just like the younger brother. We don't know what we have, how much we are loved by God and we have been far away in a foreign country. The Holy Spirit lights us up a bit and we see where we are and we head home. God sees us in the distance and before we get a word out of our mouths, He welcomes us home. Months go by, years go by and we settle in. The church becomes ours. We are faithful and loyal to the Father. All good stuff. We begin to forget the grace that welcomed us home and think more about our faithful service. We forget that God valued our relationship more than His rights. We become the older brother. God's grace is too prodigal. God doesn't measure it enough, expect enough.

You know what God tells us? There is a party going on. We have to celebrate. One who was lost is now found. Come inside. Have something to eat. Enjoy!

We don't know if the older brother comes into the party. We are left guessing. It's on purpose. We are supposed to look at ourselves. Are people less important to us than our rights, than our being right? We follow the footsteps of the one who gave up all his rights, for us. What does it mean for us to walk in those steps? What grace God must have for us to help us to love like that.