



University Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

Charles Kutz-Marks, preaching

The Responsible Brother's Defense

Lent 4, c, March 18, 2007

Luke 15:11ff.

Oh, yes, you know the story... at least you know one side of it. You know of my younger brother's impulsive nature, his wild adventure. You know of his glorious return home! Every time you hear it, you are disgusted, not with him, but with me because I didn't join in the celebration father threw for him. But, friend, there is another side to this story, and in all fairness, you should at least hear me out!

Perhaps I should hire an eloquent lawyer to make my case. My brother has scads of clergy pushing his! But you know, there are so many of us in this world who **are** older brothers or sisters, that one might expect a better understanding of our situation.¹

I cannot deny that one moment that students of the Bible let define me. It had been a long and very tough day. I was not in a good mood. And when I heard the sound of a party going on and I smelled roasting meat, I was surprised. Just surprised, nothing more. I thought I had just missed the news about a routine party that had been planned. But when I asked one of the servants, and the servant told me "your brother has come home and your father has killed the fat calf " I just lost it. The jealousy just welled up so fast and so strong! Sure, I was also happy to my brother was safe, but the other feelings were so overwhelmingly strong. Well, I lost it!

I have since often wondered if I had the chance to live that moment over again if I could act any differently. To tell the truth, I really don't know. I guess I will wonder about my response for the rest of my life, but it's not a simple thing, it takes some time to understand. I'm sure it is a sign of what is going on inside of me.

How can I tell you where these feelings come from? How can I explain all the web of feelings and expectations that are involved in being a responsible older brother?

Perhaps you've seen those like me in other families. I'm sure you have. Sometimes it's the older child sometimes it's the younger. Sometimes it's a brother, sometimes the sister. What defines is not our birth order or our sex. What defines us is this overriding sense of responsibility. Yes, it comes to define you, both to the outside world but also to yourself.

Look at me. I was responsible for a large farm. We have a lot of land, lots of animals, and enough servants to make the whole thing run. It took a lot from Dad and then later from me to make it all run smoothly. There were times when I envied the servants. At the end of the day, their work was done. Sure, they had to take orders, even orders that they didn't like, but those who are responsible never get free, never really rest. The farm's troubles and questions swirl in our heads all day and all night!

When is the right time to plant the seeds?

When is the harvest ready?

What is the best crop to plant for the coming year?

How many animals can be safely raised on that field?

Then there's the planning ahead. Everybody knows that there will be some bad years when the crops will fail or the animals will die, and if you're the

responsible one you have to make sure that there's enough food and enough money set aside so that the farm can continue, that the servants can be fed and the whole big operation continues. Just keeping the wheel rolling, no matter how much energy it drains from me....

When I look back, I guess I never really did let on what was going on inside me. After my younger brother left, or so many times I just wanted to throw up my hands and leave to. All the adventures, all the excess that he was experiencing were attractive to me to. But, after all, I was the one who had accepted responsibility for our aging parents and they looked to me to be sure that things carried on. Sometimes when I look back it seems as if my whole boring, predictable life I was trained to be the one, the one that my parents, the servants and the whole farm were going to depend upon. Is it just my a biased memory, or was I specially reared just to be responsible?

Mother always used to simplify things down to their bare essentials. I remember she used to say, "there are two kinds of people in this world." Deep down I really believe that's true. There are those who are born to come to parties and enjoying them, and there are those who work to prepare for the party, who see that house is clean, that the wine is brought in and readied, that the bread is baked ahead and that the guests are greeted. There those who go home from a party singing there happy songs and then there those like me who are dreading the cleanup afterwards, who despise that half empty cups of wine, who can never really get beyond the waste and the silliness. Mom was right there are those who are too carefree and those of us who are too care full.

One of our neighbors was teasing me once, but he hit the nail on the head. He said I was infected with the "older brother syndrome". The more I think about it, the more I know he's right.

A funny thing is that I am usually not unhappy about this. I take pride in the fact that I'm able to get things done and probably have an awful lot of my self-worth wrapped up in that, in those abilities. The stories people tell me about picture me as some self-righteous fellow, unforgiving, and loving. That just doesn't seem fair to me. I know that I'm no more perfect than anyone else.

Last week after chasing a straying goat for an hour I got so angry that I threw a rock at it and screamed, "just stay lost! I don't care." Even as I heard the words echo off the hillside, I knew that anger wasn't right. I knew my anger was expressing a poisoning within. It wasn't right, but it wasn't that bad, either, was it?

You see, all my shortcomings seem so trivial compared to the kind of transformation my brother went through. His sins were so out in the open, so clear to name. His turnaround was so profound. So clear to see. What am I supposed to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. You see, I got so angry with a goat that I threw a rock at it?"

Those of us with this older brothers syndrome are less flamboyant with our sins. We usually keep them hidden within our hearts. Our sins are less obvious- and less easily shared. That makes our sins harder to confess, and that makes us so much harder to forgive.

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There's a guilt that lies at the root of all this as well. A guilt, because I know that Dad was right when he reminded me that everything he has is also mine. I do really understand that. And there are plenty of satisfactions for me in the course of my commitment to this farm and this family. When decisions I have made lead to a seeded field turning light green, then growing vibrantly green and the barley growing tall, and finally to full harvest which means life for us all, there is such a deep satisfaction in knowing that I have invested myself well and the I have done

good for others.

There are times when the household runs smoothly and, when the food is safely in storage and the taxes to the Romans have been paid, or as I watch the children growing into the fullness of life that God desires of them, when I can see that this stable home I am helping provide means so much to so many people, that all of the burdens that I daily carry seem absolutely worth it.

And there are other times when it is the respect of those around me that keeps me going. I not only like that respect, I hunger for it. I need it. Sometimes I will go out of my way, far beyond the call of duty, because I know that someone will see what I'm doing and will respect me. Unlike my brother who always was the life of the party and could name dozens of people he'd call friends, I don't seem to have made time for that. Instead of friends, I have people who respect me. Is that enough? No, it is not...but I get by. And sometimes I look up at the sky in the evening in the immensity of this grand creation of the Lord and I feel so small that I wonder if it is even sensible to worry about the things that I do.

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So my brother arrives home. What has he to show for his inheritance? How has he invested his time? Oh, the anger! I am sorry. I may never escape these chains. But it galls me to see my younger brother come home all humbled, so contrite after wasting everything that Dad and I have worked so hard to build here! Even though he is "sorry," that doesn't bring back all he wasted. This no restitution, no justice.

In my mind I suppose I will never be free of the intense images ... of my father going out with the ring, the robe, the smell of the roasting meat, the sound of the dancing music for my brother's return. Where Dad was overwhelmed with joy, I was and may always be, **tortured** by thoughts of what might have been if my

brother had had just some shred of responsible behavior. And because I truly am judgmental, I admit it.... Lord deliver me from this!

Can you hear the war within me? I can understand with my mind how it is that Dad can be so forgiving, I can even want to be that way myself. There are times when my own sinfulness stands up before me, the lack of love the I express, so disgusts me. I yearn to be able to forgive my brother exactly as my father does and exactly as I understand that God does. And sometimes I am a very close to being able to do that....but I confess, it doesn't last. It just doesn't last, yet.

Well, that is my story. In spite of my tone, I am not really after your pity. But I do hunger for your understanding. I would feel so much better if you could understand where I'm coming from, if you could see some shred of the older brother's syndrome in yourself. And, yes, I want your respect. I want you to learn from my experience, even as I keep working to learn from it myself.

In my down times, when faced with this brokenness in my family, I will sometimes ask myself if God can forgive me for not being forgiving. How can those of us who are the responsible brothers ever know peace?

My hope lies in remembering that God is not through with me yet. This morning I noticed that the **leaves** of the few gnarled old trees we have on the farm have been pushed off to make room for new leaves that are just pushing their way into the light of day. The spring time has come. New Life! The promise of a new start. I took it as a sign from God that there is still hope.

So pray for me, and for all who are burdened with responsibilities that they embrace. Don't condemn us, but learn from us how not to become consumed. And pray that we also learn the lesson, while there is still time left to truly live free.

Amen.

¹ This sermon approach and some of its particulars come from John Vannordsall's sermon The Elder Son's Defense in A Chorus of Witnesses ed. by Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids) 1994.