

God's Loyal Love

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There is enough in this gospel lesson for three or four sermons,
but I will spare you most of them.

First, the parable characters.

Two sons.

The youngest, profligate and foolish, comes home desperate.

It does not say he repented of anything.

He may still be profligate and foolish, just now with no options.

The eldest, responsible and hardworking.

Dependable, but seems to feel entitled, that he is owed something.

And the father,

foolish and emotional,

babbling with joy in front of everyone over a no-good son,

squandering his best for an impromptu party.

Next, the background to the story.

Jesus was associating with the wrong crowd,

sitting in bars with the disreputable,

chatting it up with some who have the wrong political views,

hanging out with less-ambitious, undependable, questionable types.

The Pharisees and scribes had a few words about that.

Is there no right and wrong?

Are we in a time when *anything* goes, when “good” and “right” have no meaning?

Why should we responsible, hard-working ones tolerate laziness and poor choices?

And I just don't want to be around people I disagree with.

Where is the *justice* in doing what is right and responsible?

So Jesus, tells a story.

One son, *the younger irresponsible one*, is selfish and spoiled.

The younger asks for his inheritance and takes off to live the high life.

He is greedy and thinks only about himself.

It seems the father is too generous with both sons.

Both think of only themselves, of what's in it for them.

The elder son, brother of the prodigal in our gospel story, works the fields *alone*.

He is dutiful.

He is hard-working.

He stays past closing time.

He does the extra jobs asked of him.

And after a while people just expect *more* of him,

assume he has all the time in the world,

call him a “valued employee” but don't actually *pay* him for extra work,

expect he will always be available, yet never take time to ask how he's doing.

The elder son is *alone* in the field.

His younger brother has taken off and left all the work to him.

The elder is alone in the field also because

really, *who wants* to be around someone who is all work and no play,

who does his duty but crabs and grumbles all the time?

The elder son does his duty,

shows up on time every day, stays past closing, takes home work on weekends

and does the tasks no one else wants.

He feels he deserves *more*, at least a “thank you” once in a while.

It didn't take long to become resentful and angry.

And one might question the parenting skills of the father.
 Neither of his boys turned out well.
 The youngest was the wild one.
 In a moment of supreme selfishness, utter disrespect and complete disregard for his father
 he asks for his inheritance
before his dad is even dead!
 He squandered what little money he had
 and now demands to have *his father's* hard-earned money.

Hardest for parents
 is to let a child learn some lessons from the school of hard knocks.
 With great disappointment and very hurt heart,
 the father gives his youngest half of his own life-long earnings
 as a premature inheritance.
 And then he watches his son squander and waste all the father's money.
 The son is *a fool*.
 The father raised *a fool*.
 The son knows the price of everything but the value of nothing.
 Having hit bottom with nowhere to go
 the son returns hoping to get a job,
anything to keep from starving.
 But before the youngest can make his speech,
 the father showers him with tears of joy.
 Even for selfish son
 this father's love is loyal.

The elder son resents the unfairness of it all.
 "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you..."
 Well, no one *asked* you to work that hard.
 "... and I have never disobeyed your command..."
 Well, no one said you *had* to stay late.
 "... yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate..."
 Well, why do you think *you* are more deserving than others?

The elder son forgot that at the very beginning
 the father divided his property between the brothers.
 The elder got his reward before his time also!
 The elder son has enjoyed his inheritance all these years
 working side-by-side with his father.
 And as a bonus, the elder son *still had his father with him* all those years.
 It is *the father* who is now destitute and slave to the elder son!
 It is *the father* who has given everything out of love.
 It is *the father* who sticks around
 even when one ungrateful son runs off
 and the other angry son gripes and mopes about.
The father loves even when his children disappoint and hurt.
 The father's love is loyal.
 Loyal love is that kind of regard that is given as pure gift,
 without any expectations or conditions,
 that will always be there for the other.
 The father's love is loyal.
 God's love is loyal.

Church is the place where we know loyal love.
 Church is sanctuary, a place of safety and belonging,
 a place where we know God shows up.

We don't take tickets at the door;
 there is no fee or charge to get in.
 We don't check IDs or do pat downs;
 good and bad, naughty or nice, God welcomes.
 We don't have special seats for VIPs;
 God is glad to see each and every one of you.
 This place is sanctuary,
 where the meanness of the world
 and pettiness and put downs are left outside.
 All you good people know that.
 You know you are welcome in God's house.
 You know that even if you disappointed God this past week
 and even if you were unkind,
 that we are welcome here anyway,
 that we confess all the meanness we did,
 that God forgives each and every time
 and then God forgets.

You *know* that.

But there are many who don't know.
 There are many who don't know they are welcome here.
 This church exists for them also.
 Even if they have not given a dime in offering,
 even if they have not lifted a finger for this church,
 even if they have not so much as said "hello,"
 this church exists *for their sake*.
 We are their road back to God.
 We *faithful members* are the ones who give God's loyal love.
 We exist *for their sake*,
 so that *in us*, God welcomes with open arms,
 shedding tears of joy for having them back.

God's love is loyal.
 Jeremiah 31:32 reads,
 says the Lord, "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sins no more."
 God forgets!
 Psalm 86:15 reads, *You, O Lord are merciful and gracious,*
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
 The Old Testament—and New—is story after story
 of God's love enduring through thick and thin.
 When God's beloved are most ungrateful and rampant angry, God loves.
 And at the end of the Bible story
 when it all comes home to us personally,
 we find ourselves undeserving and too proud,
 yet showered with holy tears of joy
 from God's loyal love.

Amen.