

A LIFE-LONG ITINERARY

By

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Text: Luke 15:11-32	Date: 9/14/08	#0840
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At one time in my life I thought well of the elder son in this parable we all know by the name, the prodigal son. The elder son stayed home; he obeyed; isn't that what makes for a righteous Christian? Plus, I harbored some disdain for the younger son; he surely disappointed his father; he was as the word prodigal means wasteful: just the things that make for unchristian behavior.

I planned this sermon, "A Life-Long Itinerary," as part of a final series about the church. In it I wanted to say something about how I've seen the church at work over the course of my life, certainly in the time I have served it as pastor. This parable, which I much prefer to call the parable of the loving father, points to ways I have changed within my life long itinerary. The words of the parable are just the same as they were when I began. But now I realize that it wasn't only the younger son who went to the "so called" far country, so did the elder son. It's just that the younger son came to himself and returned. The heart of the parable is the father being able to receive his son back home with joy. It is also about the father pleading with the arrogant

elder son to join the celebration. The final words are the loving father's, "your brother...was lost and has been found."

Maybe your own life itinerary has included a renewed perspective on the teachings of scripture especially on the practice of forgiveness. I believe when Jesus calls us to follow him he accepts us where we are in life, but then challenges us to live more and more by the vision he has for the world. As such, my perspective on the loving father and his two sons has now evolved into a parable about the church.

On the back of your bulletin is a diagram I know many of you have seen before. It attempts to show the Christian church rooted in Jesus Christ yet developing into a tree with many branches. During membership conversations I've used this diagram to show that regardless if your itinerary brought you from the Methodists or the Catholics or were Presbyterian all your life, we all had our beginning in Jesus Christ. However, not a few of you, have looked at the diagram and asked: why are there branches at all. The answer is that over the centuries Christians have traveled to the far country some by imperiously seeking their fortune, others by self righteously staying home.

Let me give examples from just the Presbyterian branch. It looks like one branch down to our own day. In fact we should add to it scads of smaller branches and twigs. In the 1720's after the Presbyterian Church got established on these shores an argument over the use of the Westminster confession of faith broke the church in two. Within twenty years, however, they reconciled. During the civil war the Presbyterian Church broke

north and south as did other protestant denominations. One issue of course was slavery. We didn't reunify until 1983. Even then another split occurred which created the Presbyterian Church in America, a denomination that does not ordain women as elders, deacons or ministers. In the 1920's the Presbyterian Church was plagued by another conflict often referred to as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The issue revolved around how literal are the words of scripture. In the wake of the fighting, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was formed, from which the Bible Presbyterian Church soon broke off.

Two sons: one says I'm free and cuts loose; the other says I've got family responsibilities, but is resentful; two sons both claim they have the truth. As I have just outlined from our Presbyterian history, that's the parable of the church. Except for one thing: the loving father. What I mean is that the church is not ours as if we were children fighting over toys. The church is the loving father's. How quickly we leave out this major component. If we were that father we might very well thrash the younger son to within an inch of his life upon his return. That's what he deserves. In fact the younger son expected it and had a speech prepared to ameliorate his father's wrath: hire me as your servant, because I'm not worthy to be your son.

Instead the father throws a party. And here's the part that is so hard to understand, particularly if we allow this to be a parable of the church. The party the father hosts is not for his younger son as the elder son falsely accuses the father. The party is for the father. The father says in effect: I never thought I'd see this

day; my son is home; I'm a happy man; share my joy. The parable of the loving father tells us about the complexities of the church, the hard choices, the disappointments, the invitations, the need for repentance, the opportunities for forgiveness, the occasions for joyful celebration, all mixed up together. When we heed the call to follow Jesus, perhaps at the time of confirmation class, maybe we fanaticize the church as one happy family. So when this fantasy doesn't exactly play out as we imagined, who is our model for our action: the younger son, the elder son or the loving father?

When I finished seminary, the confession of 1967 had just been approved by our General Assembly. It teaches that the church needs to be at the forefront of a ministry of reconciliation. Immediately, I encountered people who were angry that the Presbyterians had added another confession along side their beloved Westminster. As I began serving my first congregation, women were still struggling to obtain pastoral positions. Black Presbyterian clergy were up in arms over a white backlash against the Angela Davis legal defense. Clergy colleagues were leaving the ministry.

Forty years have come and gone and yet other issues have pushed forward to gain our attention. One constellation of issues which has gained energy over this period involves sex education, reproductive rights, marriage, gender identification and tolerance of sin among our ordained leaders. This group of interrelated issues is causing Presbyterians to stake their claim as either the younger or elder son, to go into the far country of leaving the

family or the far country of intransigence, bitterness and legal maneuvers: once again relegating the loving father to the margins and believing that the future of the church is in our hands to decide.

For a long time I've believed that the general issue of homosexuality and the specific dimension of it regarding qualification for leadership in the church is a huge red herring. We've wasted too much time making it an issue that it is not, an issue that hides our fear of things we don't understand and that are mysteries of our humanity, an issue that often masks our smugness. I do not understand why the issue of homosexuality distresses the church to such a degree, when there are more critical issues threatening the church. But I do understand the sin of rejecting fellow human beings for even less provocation than their sexual identity. Having said these things, I find myself in the elder son category and very much in need of the loving father.

"To be a community of truth," wrote William Willimon when he was chaplain at Duke University, "the church must be a community of forgiveness." What does this really mean? It means that we learn the parable of the loving father by heart, and every time we want to be the self righteous elder son, we recite the parable and meditate on what it takes for the loving father to have cause to celebrate. And every time we want to cut and run like the younger son, we recite the parable and meditate on what it takes for the loving father to receive us home with joy.

"We live in a phase of redemptive history that the great Mennonite ethicist John Howard Yoder described as the time of

God's patience with a sinful world." In quoting Yoder the president of Fuller Seminary says: "that does not mean passive withdrawal from the urgent issues that confront humankind." I would say that the parable of the loving father inspires us to embrace the world as God has done, who loved it so much he sent his son.