

Lost Son #2 – Resentful Obedience

Luke 15:25-32 by Patty Friesen (Mar.6/16)

Today we come to the elder son in the parable of the prodigal. Lost Son #2 I call him. While the return of lost son #1 and the welcome of the father are the center of the scripture text in Luke, in Rembrandt's painting, they are not centered. They are in their intimate embrace to the left of the canvas, while the elder son is on the right and it is this huge space between the main characters that is the centerpiece, divided space highlighted by this trench running past the elder son's feet and by these skeptical onlookers in the middle. It is this tense space created by the elder son that we will turn to today.

In a way the elder son is very much like his father. Both are bearded and wear large red cloaks over their shoulders. These externals suggest that he and his father have much in common and this commonality is underlined by the light on the elder son which connects his face in a very direct way with the luminous face of his father. But what a painful difference between the two! The father bends over his returning son. The elder son stands stiffly erect, a posture accentuated by the long staff reaching from his hand to the floor. The father's mantle is wide and welcoming; the son's hangs flat over his body. The father's hands are spread out and touch the homecomer in a gesture of blessing; the son's are clasped together and held close to his chest. There is light on both faces, but the light from the father's face flows through his whole body – especially his hands and engulfs the younger son in a great halo of luminous warmth; where the light on the face of the elder son is cold and constricted. His figure remains in the dark and his clasped hands remain in the shadows.

The parable that Rembrandt painted might well be called the Parable of the Lost Sons. Not only did the younger son, who left home to look for freedom and happiness in a distant country, get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man. Exteriorly he did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but interiorly, he wandered away from happiness and freedom to a distant country of separation and resentment. Sometimes the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home.

Again Rembrandt paints the elder son like he knows him. We had previously seen the self-portrait of Rembrandt as the younger partying son with the peacock feather in his hat, the rebellious child of an Anabaptist mother in Amsterdam. How many Anabaptist mothers have had prodigal sons through history? New biographies on Rembrandt reveal his elder son tendencies as well. They stress that Rembrandt was subject to the demands of his sponsors and his need for money led him to paint more according to the fashion of the day than any spiritual vision. According to family and friends, Rembrandt was difficult to get along with. After the death of his wife and son, Rembrandt spiraled into bitterness, producing no work in 1649, and after living with Geertje Dircx for six years, he had her institutionalized. When it came time for her release, he hired an agent to collect evidence against her, to make certain that she stayed locked up. For we lovers of Rembrandt, these are hard biographies to hear but it is interesting that he included the angry elder son in his final painting, as a character known to him as well as the prodigal.

And I dare say, we all have a bit of the elder son in us. Or at least, we who are firstborns, know what it is like to be stuck doing the dishes while the younger siblings

play outside or know what it is like to be stuck going to school while the younger siblings again play and exclude the older sister when she comes home. No resentments there.

While criticizing our colleagues at the pastors' week at CMU, Patrick and I both realized that we had to give up bad attitudes for Lent. He gave up judgementalism. He is the youngest child but acts like a firstborn because there are so many years between his siblings. I'm a true firstborn full of resentment and bitterness which I gave up for Lent and which has been harder to give up than the bitter dark chocolate I love.

Even Henri Nouwen, saint Henri said he identifies with the elder son. Being a priest, he saw all his friends having a good time doing all sorts of things that he condemned but at the same time he wondered why he didn't have the nerve to do some of them himself. There is a wonderful epitaph written on a tombstone in Minnesota that says, "I regret all the temptations I successfully resisted." The deceased must have been an elder son.

The elder son says, All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property, he and his loose women, you kill the calf we had been fattening. These words express the depth of his hurt and sense of betrayal. He says, this son of yours, divorcing himself from his brother and his father. He has become a foreigner in his own house.

The elder son did all the right things. He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, and hardworking. People respected him, admired him, praised him, and likely considered him a model son. Outwardly, the elder son was faultless. But when confronted by his

father's joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him, and boils to the surface. Suddenly, there becomes glaringly visible a resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person, one that had remained deeply hidden even though it had been growing stronger and more powerful over the years.

There is so much resentment among the just and the righteous. There is so much judgment, condemnation, and prejudice among the saints. There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding sin. The Frozen Chosen, we are sometimes called. 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. But with that comes a seriousness, a moralistic intensity and even a touch of fanaticism, that makes it difficult to feel at home in God's house. There is a deeper complaint that comes from a heart that feels it never received what it was due. It is the complaint that cries out, I tried so hard, worked so long, did so much and still I have not received what others get so easily. Why do people not thank me, not invite me, not play with me, not honour me?

When the elder son came in from the fields, the party was already in progress. Calling one of the servants, he asked what it was all about. Once again, he is being excluded. The unsuspecting servant, full of excitement, and eager to share the good news, explains. Your brother and come, and your father has killed the fat calf because he has got him back safe and sound. He was angry then and refused to go in. Joy and resentment cannot co exist. The music and dancing become a cause for even greater withdrawal.

Memories of when I've been judgmental and withdrawn myself from friends are too painful to recount. I am totally unable to root out my resentments, no matter how

hard I try this Lent. Confronted here with the impossibility of self-redemption, I now understand Jesus' words to Nicodemus. Do not be surprised when I say, You must be born from above. Indeed, something has to happen that I myself cannot cause to happen. I cannot rebirth myself. I can only be healed from above and then within. Only with God, is this possible.

The loving parent goes out to the elder son, just as he did to the younger, inviting him to come in and says, My son you are with me always and all I have is yours. The father's declaration of unqualified love eliminates any possibility that the younger son is more loved than the elder. All I have is yours. There could be no clearer statement of the father's unlimited love for his elder son. He sees with love the passion of his younger son, even when it is not regulated by obedience. With the same love, he sees the obedience of the elder son, even when it is not vitalized by passion. In God's house there are many rooms, Jesus says. Each child of God has their unique place, all of them places of God. God is urging us to come home, to enter light and to discover there that, in God, all people are uniquely and completely loved. In the light of God, I can finally see my neighbor as my brother or sister, as the one who belongs as much to God as I do.

We never know if the elder son comes around and joins the party. The story leaves us with space, even as Rembrandt left space in the middle of his painting to contemplate our own conversion. Let us pray...