

"It's Not Fair"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year C
March 14, 2010
Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Dr. David T. Howeth

It's not fair. From the standpoint of the older brother, what happens to the younger brother in Jesus' parable is just not fair. If we were in the older brother's shoes, we would be as angry, as bitter, as frustrated as he was. There's no way that the father's actions toward the younger son can be seen as right, as just, as fair.

It's not fair, because from the standpoint of the older brother, there seems to have been a double standard operating at home. It's almost as if the two brothers had two different fathers, one strict and the other one lax. There were two sets of rules—one that applied to the first-born and another that applied to the last-born, the baby. The father appears to treat the two sons in a completely different manner, and that hardly seems fair.

The older brother acts like we would expect a first-born to act. He is the "ought" child. He is responsible; he is serious; he is sensible; he does all the right things; he plays by the rules; he is conservative; he never colors outside the lines; he doesn't take risks. He thinks long and hard before he makes decisions, counting the cost and weighing the consequences. He is highly motivated, goal-oriented, an over-achiever, a self-starter, and self-reliant. He stays at home, plays it safe, and works hard. Jesus must have known about birth order when

he made up this parable. Yes, the older brother's behavior is consistent with his being a first-born child.

Do you remember the movie *Legends of the Fall* that came out a few years ago? The older brother in this parable is a great deal like the brother portrayed in the film by Aidan Quinn. If you recall at one point in the movie he says to his younger brother, played by Brad Pitt, that he can't understand why he, the older brother, has played by the rules all his life and yet everyone seems to like his younger brother better. Yes, the older brother in Jesus' parable certainly fits the pattern for first-born children.

And the younger brother in Jesus' parable acts like we might expect the baby of the family to act—more spoiled and less responsible; more relaxed, liberal, playful, and carefree. He breaks rules, takes risks, is spontaneous and impulsive. He's somewhat lazy and unmotivated. He takes advantage of the father, presumes upon the father, uses the father, and the father lets him get away with it.

Do you remember the movie *Parenthood*, the movie directed by Ron Howard that has inspired the new television show? The younger brother in this parable is like the brother that Tom Hulce plays in that film, the son who brings his infant child home to be raised by his parents, the child's grandparents, and leaves again after taking money from his dad to pay off gambling debts and after turning down the opportunity his dad gives him to make an honest living working with his father in the hardware store.

Can you tell I'm a first-born child, an older brother? We first-borns often have a hard time dealing with last-borns. I have to

admit it, I don't like this parable very much, because I can relate better to the older brother than I can to the younger one. I don't think it's fair the way this parable turns out, and I don't think I'm the only one here this morning who feels this way. You ask any oldest child. What do they say? Their younger brother or sister got away with murder growing up. Their parents were a lot easier on them, just like in the parable.

As a first-born child, an older brother, I am more comfortable with rules and regulations, law and order, black and white. There is a way things ought to be done—a right way to load the dishwasher, do the laundry, dust the furniture, cook a meal, and set the table. Everything has its place. There is a routine for everything. I like for things to stay the same and never change.

There was an installment of the comic strip "Blondie" in which Dagwood is seated at the bar at the diner talking to the short order cook. Dagwood is reading the menu and remarks, "It's always the same old food! Isn't there ever anything new?," to which the cook replies, "Yes! We have something new. Today I can offer you fajitas with chives, sour cream, lettuce, onion, guacamole, and bacon bits!" Dagwood ponders for a moment and then says, "I'll have a hamburger, with ketchup and pickles," the exact same thing he always orders.

That's me, and probably the rest of you who are first-borns. We would never take the money and run like the younger brother in Jesus' parable. We wouldn't think of going to a distant country and living it up.

We would never be caught throwing money away like he did. There is no way we would ever wind up sloppin' hogs and even eating their food out of

desperation. Are you kidding? That's crazy. That wouldn't be the responsible thing to do. We know what's expected of us; we know what's appropriate. We know how to act. We live by the rules, by oughts and shoulds and musts. Do you know that there are more first-borns in seminary than any of the other birth order children? We know what's right.

Before Stephanie and I got married, when I was living alone in The Colony, I received a mixed blessing. I experienced something very difficult for me and yet something very beneficial for me. My sister, Donna, moved in with me, and amazingly we both survived the ordeal without killing each other. She's a last-born, the baby of my family. She's a lot more freed-up and a lot less hung-up than I am. She can be playful and spontaneous and give herself permission to relax, even to be lazy. For her, things don't have to be done in a certain way and at a certain time. She can color outside the lines and break the rules, so her room at my house always looked like an island of chaos in a sea of order. She is so much different than I am. She even can say "no" to things she doesn't want to do. She doesn't have to please everyone else all the time. Now that's radical.

She's like Calvin in one installment of the "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon strip. He is on the phone. "Hello?" he says, "Yes, I'd like to speak with the chief of police. Hello chief? Is it a law that your socks have to match anything else you're wearing?" Then Calvin yells into the kitchen, "Hey Mom, listen to this!" My sister, Donna, can do that. Her most frequently spoken words to me tend to be, "So what? Who cares? Big deal!" And I need to hear those words almost every time she says

them to me. It isn't easy being obsessive-compulsive; it's hard being the older brother.

That's why this parable is so sad to me. Yes, the reconciliation between the father and the younger son is sweet. It brings tears to my eyes. To think of the father scanning the horizon every day for his lost son, hoping that today might be the day of his return. Then, one day, he sees him, off in the distance. He can just barely make him out. And the father's heart leaps inside him. He can't help himself. He runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him. Joy fills the father. He had almost given up hope. He had almost begun to think the worst, that his son was dead. But he's not; he's home again. He's safe now. That's all that matters. I can't imagine a more beautiful scene than this reunion. It is sweet indeed.

But the parable is also sad because of the estrangement between the father and the older son. It breaks my heart. The father regains one son and loses another in the process. The older son is so angry, so hurt, so bitter. The father pleads, and the older son vents his frustration. The father has the last word in the parable, but there is no reconciliation. We don't know what happens between the older brother and the father.

The older brother and the father can't communicate, because they aren't talking the same language. They are estranged, because they are living in two different worlds, operating under two completely different systems that are altogether incompatible. *The older brother, you see, is operating under the law, while the father is operating out of grace.* We are talking night and day here, AM and FM, oil and water, plaid and

paisleys—they just don't go together.

We see what it looks like when law and grace come together at two different points in the parable. At one point the younger son comes home and confesses his sin. He asks only to be taken in as a slave. He knows what he deserves. He knows what is right. To be taken back as a slave would be more than fair. But *that is not how grace operates*. Grace brings out the robe, the expensive designer silk robe, puts the diamond on the finger and the Birkenstocks on the feet, hires a band, breaks out the champagne, and throws a party.

We see how well law and grace mix at another point in the story when the father goes out to try to persuade the older son to come in and join the celebration. Law refuses to take part in the festivities, complains that the father never would have done something like that for the older son, and reminds the father of all the sins of the other son. Law can't even bring itself to call the one who has come home brother. He is "this son of yours."

Jesus told this parable for a reason. His audience was made up of older brothers. He was talking to me. And what is he saying? He is saying, "Take a look at these two worlds, these two ways of operating. Which is better, law or grace?" Which is better? Well let's see. With law there is what's right, what ought to be, rules and regulations, structure and order. There is working like a slave. There is duty and honor and service. There is bitterness and frustration and resentment and jealousy and anger and estrangement. And with grace there is a fatted calf being eaten and enjoyed. There's a party—an old-fashioned, down home barbecue. There is laughing and singing and dancing. There

is passing around the old photo albums and remembering the good times. There are warm embraces and tears of joy. There is a homecoming.

And so I ask you this morning, "How do things operate in your life?"

Are you operating under the law? Are you hung-up on the way things ought to be done? Are rules and regulations what are of primary importance? Are you rigid, inflexible, intolerant, quick to judge and condemn? Are your expectations of others around you unrealistically high? Do you demand perfection of yourself and everyone else? Are you overly anxious about the smallest of things? Do you find yourself feeling angry, bitter, frustrated, resentful, and jealous most of the time? Maybe there is a better way to operate.

Can you operate out of grace? Grace. No, it's not fair. It's not the way it ought to be. It's not perfect. The rules don't always get followed. It's rather unpredictable and disorderly. Messes don't always get cleaned up, and things are not always in their place. The right thing doesn't always happen. So what? Who cares? Big deal! *Grace is just not fair when seen from the standpoint of the law.* But I know a good thing when I see it. The father and the younger son are happy. There's joy in their lives. And there's love present— unconditional love, forgiving love, accepting love, embracing love, affirming love, open and inclusive love, non-judgmental love—God's kind of love. It's taken me a long time to get there. I am not always there even today—but I think I'd rather be at the party—eating, drinking, dancing, having fun with them. Wouldn't you? Can you?