



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Lent 4 (C)

#### Two Sons

[RCL] Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*[Today's sermon is presented in the format of a spoken-word poem; to save paper, it is formatted here in two columns. – Ed.]*

There was a man who had two sons.  
So our story begins.

“A man with two sons,”  
is how a lot of stories begin,  
if you think about it.

That first man, expelled from the garden  
had those two sons  
named Cain and Abel.  
Later followed by those other famous  
brothers, Ishmael and Isaac,  
the duo Esau and Jacob.

There have been many men  
with two sons.  
And the younger of the sons,  
those second born:  
Abel and Isaac and Jacob...  
well, you know how it goes.  
They are beloved,  
the ones born to  
their fathers  
late in life,  
the ones born of the favored wife;  
not the concubine's children, but  
the righteous ones,

the ones to inherit  
the promises of God.

We expect the second son  
to be clever and righteous,  
savvy and faithful to his father.  
We don't expect the second son  
to squander away his inheritance.  
That is not how the tale of two sons goes.  
And so, it would seem  
our story instantly veers off  
course.  
We find ourselves surprised,  
intrigued by the journey we are on.

This younger son,  
heart of his father's heart,  
takes off for a distant country  
to live his prodigal life  
squandering away all that he had been given,  
a narcissistic lavishness  
that we can't help but frown upon.  
Such is not proper living, after all.

And, as if a self-appointed Joseph,  
in an Egypt-like place,  
this younger son

finds himself  
facing a famine,  
imagining his father's  
servants eating their fill  
of daily bread.

So, he puts on a repentant posture,  
rehearsing his speech of remorse.  
But does it even matter?  
He can barely get it out of his  
mouth, his father doesn't seem  
to even hear him,  
it doesn't seem to matter  
what he says.

Because his father is  
far too busy running  
rushing  
hugging  
kissing  
putting a robe around him  
perhaps one that resembles  
a coat of many colors,  
Ordering his servants  
to kill a fatted calf.  
The opposite of a famine  
awaits him,  
not because his repentance  
was perfect or his posture  
flawlessly humble.

The feast awaits  
not because we say the right things  
or put on a good show of remorse.  
The feast awaits because his father,  
his yearning, adoring father was waiting  
for him to come home  
and come home he had.

And this would've

been a startling image  
of the kingdom of God  
in and of itself;  
a depiction of a radically generous  
and lavish God.  
It is far too much mercy  
for any of us to absorb  
in a single day.

It would've been a  
sufficient and scandalous  
tale of grace and forgiveness  
all by itself.

But this is a tale of two sons.

And so now  
we join that elder son –  
the Cain, the Ishmael, the Esau, the one  
our ancient stories so rarely shine a light on,  
letting them slip off into the sidelines of history.  
But here, we have a moment  
to see his world,  
to know what it's like  
to be the son who stayed.

We join him  
on his way in from the fields,  
tired from the sun,  
thirsty and longing  
for respite, for a warm meal, for the coolness of  
night.

Had he counted the minutes  
the hours, the days  
that he had worked the fields,  
since his younger brother had left,  
his hands bearing the evidence  
splintered and calloused,  
had he counted those days?

Had he kept track –  
a long tally of bitter triumphs –  
of the number of goats and calves  
he had raised from birth to slaughter?  
An offering of sustenance for the whole family,  
laced with a dose of indignation.

Had he silently seethed his way through the  
house  
sucking the air out of the room as he walked in  
or had he been exceedingly gentle with his father  
tiptoeing on eggshells  
too afraid to further shatter a delicate heart?

Had his sense of fairness  
and budding self-righteousness  
ever put a boulder in front  
of his joy before  
this moment, here and now?

We witness his father come toward him  
pleading him to come inside  
to join the feast.  
The father, yet again, makes  
a pilgrimage from the house  
with urgency and sincerity  
toward a wayward son.

This elder son's waywardness  
was marked not by opulent abandon  
but by a thriftiness,  
a stinginess of heart.  
His stinginess morphed  
into being,  
with the good-intended  
ingredients of  
justice and fairness  
mixed  
with those nagging

thoughts that he had never been properly  
thanked  
or appreciated.

A deadly recipe.

He has exiled himself from his own home  
and stands there enraged  
unable to cross the hurdle  
of his own hardened and bitter heart.

This elder son,  
embodies what  
poet Jack Gilbert  
warns about in his poem, "A Brief for the  
Defense":

"To make injustice the only  
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil."

Gilbert is not telling us  
to stop our ears or close our eyes  
to the heap of sadnesses  
we find ourselves witnessing or complicit in.  
He's not saying to ignore the wrongs  
actually done against us or others.  
That will be impossible.  
We live in a land of ruins  
and with hearts that pang  
with indignation and sorrow.

Gilbert, instead, earlier in the poem  
is pleading with us: Don't let the sorrows  
and injustices,  
the wrongs wronged and the deeds done,  
the sins of our brothers and the sins of our own  
hearts  
be the only things that get our attention,  
don't let all of that  
keep us from "risk[ing] delight."

Don't let them become immovable boulders  
on your path toward a party.

Because, Gilbert writes later in the poem,  
"There will be  
music despite everything."

And music there is -  
A joyful and raucous celebration  
in the house right beyond his father's silhouette.  
Even after his younger brother  
wastes his precious worldly goods,  
even after the sorrow of watching his father  
grieve a beloved son  
and even after years of working  
in the fields alone, abandoned,  
the music begins again.

And here, the parable, this tale of two sons,  
does its final magic.

It ends.  
It does not narrate  
the choice of the elder son.  
It does not say he turned around  
and walked away, toward the empty fields  
all alone, with his righteousness as his sole  
companion.  
Nor does it tell us that his heart  
miraculously  
thawed.

It does not tell us what the elder son chooses.

For he is us. And we are him.

And it is our choice to make.

Will we join the great feast  
where sinners of all kinds  
gather,  
welcomed home from their various  
prodigal journeys?  
Will we nurse our resentments  
and self-righteous complaints  
to the end of our days  
alone in our castle on a hill?

Will we get out of our own way,  
and let God's love thaw those bricks  
of bitterness?  
Will we come back to  
the only home we've ever known?

It is our choice to make.  
No one will force you through the door.  
The father stands there,  
arms extended,  
eyes hopeful  
and expectant,  
grace abounding  
for you and me,  
a mercy that is  
hard to receive,  
but what else  
is there to do but  
receive it?

The music is playing.  
The fatted calf is ready.  
Will you risk delight?  
Will you keep the feast?

***The Rev. Kellan Day** is the rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Greenville, South Carolina. She is a graduate of The School of Theology at the University of the South. Kellan and her spouse, Kai, relish time outside – climbing, hiking with their dog, and sitting on porches with friends.*