

## "A GOOD WORD FOR THE ELDER BROTHER"

TEXT: "But he was angry and refused to go in".

(Luke 15: 28)

INTRODUCTION The longest acceptance speech for an Oscar was made many years ago by Greer Garson for her role in "Mrs. Miniver". They say that it ran close to forty-five minutes. George Jessel commented, "Be brief. I know a fellow who gave up the British throne in twenty-three minutes".

Many public speakers do not know when to stop. A point is made - well made. It's clinched by a good illustration, or perhaps a line of poetry. But - alas - the speaker misses his opportunity; he has more to say and on he goes.

DEVELOPMENT One wonders.....was Jesus guilty of such a failing in the 15th chapter of Luke's Gospel. I'm referring to the story of the Prodigal Son. It's the well-known story of the young man who left his father's house, blew his inheritance in the far-off country and determined - when he finally hit rock bottom - to rise up and return home. I've never come across a more ~~succinct~~ and descriptive outline of the prodigal's experience than this: sick of home. Homesick. Home. ~~That~~ just about tells it all.

But how would his father react? At worst, he would fuss with him for his folly and kick him out. But, as we happily know, this was not the case. For when the son was yet a great way off the father ran to meet him, fell on his neck and kissed him, commanded that the fatted calf be killed, ordered a banquet prepared. He put a robe on his back, a ring on his finger, and shoes on his feet. We can feel the joy and the electricity in the air in those moving words that he cried, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And we read, "And they began to make merry".

BUT THE STORY GOES ON But the story goes on. In the next breath, Jesus went on to say, "Now his elder son was in the field". Mind you, what a comedown from the heights.

This Elder Brother section has been challenged. The black mood that follows is so sharply divergent from the rest of the parable that some have suggested that it did not belong to the original. Some commentators feel it was added later. But Jesus allerted us from the start that there were three figures in this story. "There was a man who had two sons" is the way the story begins. There is a unity here that's unbreakable. The Elder Brother belongs. He's here by design and not by accident. He wasn't tucked in later on by some editor.

The Elder Brother comes through as a bit of a villain in the story. At least so it would seem on first glance. There's no indication in the parable that he ever missed his younger brother, or went out to look for him. You sense that he is resentful of the father's love and smugly conscious of his fine record of hard work. He's not on the same "wave length" with his father's highs and lows. He doesn't share the father's sorrow when the boy is away; he doesn't share the father's gladness when the brother returns. We get the picture here of a sulking prude. The music angered him. He refused to go in and share in the homecoming. He would not sanction outwardly ~~what~~ he inwardly resented.

If we deal with this story on the human level, we can regard him with sympathy. The child who stays at home is sometimes taken for granted. There was probably a certain gaiety in the prodigal - more glitter than light - while the Elder Son could claim only routine gifts. He was probably overlooked, and some curdling resentments may have grown in him that he himself hardly understood.

This afternoon the Jets will be playing the Vikings. Two fine quarterbacks will face each other - Namath of the Jets and Tarkenton of the Vikings. There was an article in one of our papers about six years ago (when Tarkenton played for the NY Giants) that compared the life styles and playing styles of these two quarterbacks. Remember the title: "The Swinger and the Square". A good description of these two brothers in the story Jesus told.

BUT MORE ON THE "SQUARE"

A number of years ago I preached a sermon on the Elder Brother under the title, "The Prodigal Who Stayed At Home". In that message, I pointed out that while the younger son was prodigal in body, at least part of his heart was at home; but the elder brother was prodigal at heart and only his body was at home. I was getting at the sins of the disposition and took the elder brother to task for his self-pity, his self-righteousness and his jealousy - all of which spring from an inward-turning eye.

One worshipper came up to me at the coffee hour and took me to task for being too hard on the Elder Brother. She claimed he had his good points and she made her point, for in the years since then I have come to appreciate more fully the contributions that Elder Brother types do make to the on-going life of our world.

Frankly, I've had just about enough of the anti-hero - on the stage, on the screen, in books. You know the type - the hooker who turns out to be the only one brave enough to rescue a child from a burning building; or the alcoholic who outdoes the deacon in generosity at Christmas time; the likeable cop-killer; the porno magazine producer who lectures us from time to time on the Merv Griffin Show on constitutional liberty; the contract-jumping athletes and coaches who break their word for monetary reward and then turn around and preach to the young of America on the character building role of sports in life.

Say what you will about this shadowy, icy figure, but let it also be noted that the Elder Brother was not a drain on anyone. Call him a "square" or a "drudge" if you will, but he was productive - "Mr. Steady"...."Old Reliable". Others counted on his labors and he did not let them down. It's quite possible that the Prodigal wouldn't have had a home to come home to if the older brother hadn't stayed at home and helped to keep things going.

It is the Elder Brothers of the world who hold society together while the Prodigals are having their fling. Aren't you glad when you called your mother last Sunday that the operator wasn't stoned? Aren't you glad that as a child when you got home from school that your mother was there - not running around in search of sexual liberation? Aren't you glad that someone in your family saves regularly - else how would you have managed in that last emergency? So let's hear it today for the farmers who farm, the teachers who teach, the salesmen who sell, the builders who build, the mothers who mother, and the workers who work!

Toast the Broadway Joes of this world, if you will - but if all of us took the swinger's way, our world would revert to chaos by sundown. The Elder Brother stands for something good and dependable in life, and he does deserve something more from us than scorn and derision. So much in the way of a kind word for the Elder Brother, on the human level.

STORY ABOUT RELIGION

This story of the Prodigal Son is basically a story about religion. It was as a representative of religion, and only in that role that the Elder Brother was wrong. His life style is not being censured in this story any more than the life style of the Prodigal is being praised.

The target of Jesus in this parable were the Scribes and the Pharisees who failed to understand why He would associate with riffraff - the publicans and sinners. Theirs was a religion of loveless piety, loveless morality, and a loveless respectability. And so Jesus here was going to great lengths to teach them and to show them that God is a social being who is capable of a warm, welcoming love for all people - no matter what they've done or where they've been. God's love reaches out and knows no limits...includes those in far-off country.

But here is where this truth is up against is. I sometimes feel the more decent and upright we are, the more difficult it is for us to understand and to receive grace. The Church has a problem at this point. We keep saying "grace" and "love", but the world keeps hearing "law" and sees a certain "legalism" in the way we go about it. We claim to be in the church as recipients of grace, but so often we defend our membership on the strength of some moral track record or pattern of performance.....

Not only do the upright have a hard time understanding and receiving grace, they actually resent it. They have the feeling that perhaps they deserve more and that others deserve less. Why did the Elder Brother resent it? He hadn't lost anything. He still has as much money and land as ever. He still had a place to sleep and a setting at his father's table. Why did he resent it.

It puts one in mind of Jesus' story of the man who needed some "farm temporaries". He went out early in the morning and engaged some workers for one denarius. He went out again at the third hour and hired additional men at the same rate. Likewise at the sixth and the ninth hours. Still short of manpower, he went out and hired others at the eleventh hour. Behold, he gave them all the same wage! Then came the grumbling and griping. But the lord of the manor held firm. Asked he, "Do you begrudge my generosity? You got what we bargained for". The New English Bible puts it, "Why be jealous because I am kind?"

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Love - you see - isn't like soy beans....the more of which dispose of the less you have. Love is more like joy and peace and encouragement...the more you give the more there is to go around. Jesus is telling us that there is a disposition in God to welcome warly every man or woman, boy or girl - no matter where they've been or what they've done. This is grace.

I read a story this Summer that is so beautiful it is almost unbelievable. It is about a woman who was driving her husband's car and was involved in a bad accident. She smashed the car completely. When she reached into the glove compartment for the insurance paper, a note fell out. It had been written by her husband. It said simply, "Remember, dear, it is you that I love".

This is the meaning of the parable. This is the heart of the Gospel.  
"It is YOU that I love". This is what God was saying to us in Jesus Christ!

HOW DOES IT END

How does the story end? We do not know. We do know that the father "went out" to both sons. First, to the Prodigal as he came up the road to his home. And then when the father was told that the eldest son was refusing to come in for the music and dancing, for the home-coming celebration, he "went out" to him, also. And he addressed the eldest son by one of the most intimate terms in Greek - "teknon" - meaning, my dear son.

One wonders: did the Elder Brother come in? What do you think? We really don't know. I should like to think he did, that the wonderful invasion of his father's love into his heart made the difference, and brought him in. The story could have ended with either one of these endings:

Ending number one:

"And so he walked out to the barn muttering and cursing under his breath, 'I thank thee God that I am not as other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like my younger brother....I fast twice a week, and you know that I give tithes of all that I possess, and that I do my thing at the Temple'."

Or, it could have ended in this fashion and I should like to think it did, for I believe in the power of redeeming love, and that is why I have a good word for the Elder Brother today,

"He felt the power of his father's love moving in his heart....and he hurried in to welcome his brother back hom. And when the father saw it his old heart rejoiced, and he cried aloud for all to hear, 'A double celebration tonight! For both of my wons were dead and are alive again. Both were lost and have been found!'"

PRAYER

Make us responsive, O God, to that gentle, persistent invasion of thy love in our hearts. As we feel it moving in these quiet moments, help us to be toward others what Thou hast been toward us. Grant that the words of our faith may become the attitudes of our minds and the dispositions of our hearts. Amen