

February 28 2016

*Scripture Readings*

*Psalm 63:1-8*

*II Corinthians 5:16-21*

*Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

**Sermon** *The One Who Was Always There*

I don't know how many of you, have done much work with birth order. I find it rather fascinating. I went to a conference a few years ago, the leader made some interesting points in the presentation about the order of children's birth in a family and how this often plays a role in the dynamic of a family life. Try some of these on and see how they fit for you as we move along here. The point she tried to make is that the order of our birth compared to our brothers and sisters or whether we have brothers and sisters at all can kind of help to determine what kind of person we might turn out to be and how we are going to function as human beings in the larger world around us. Of course your observations are not going to be set in stone but rather they are part of many other factors which obviously come into play. She did say that a good bit is characteristic of birth order and rings true. We'll see if they are true for you. First of all, this would have been true for my mother, only children-who is an only child here? There are only a couple of them here today. Only children might have a tendency to be a little less social, more independent because of large amount of time they spent alone or with adults as they were children. That is a simple kind of look at it.

Secondly, older children-who is an older child? They have a tendency to be a lot more stable, responsible because of the fact that often they were given more responsibilities and more was expected of them.

How about those poor lost children who are in the middle? - The middle children. Who are middle children? Many times they might have the feeling that they were left out or just a part of a crowd if it was a big family. But they often times have a tendency to work better in groups; play better with their play mates and that is a good thing. And they are at home in larger groups like corporations or universities.

Ah but finally, those babies of the family-who are babies of their families? Just checking. Often times they had a reputation for being spoilt and irresponsible but they also turn out to have an easy-going fun-loving personalities than their brothers and sisters and sometimes a lot more loyalty to their parents as their parents grow older and need to be cared for. These are just thumb-nail sketches. As I said before the descriptions might not be completely accurate but there is some truth in each of them and we can think back to times in our own families, in our

childhood and see how some of these things played themselves out in our families. In my family for example I remember how I resented it when my baby sister was treated a lot more leniently than I believed that she should have been. And in a differently situation, I always seemed to be expected to take more responsibility for something; while she could be off with her friends doing some other thing that who knows what it was. She on the other hand always tells of resenting the expectation put on her by our parents and the teachers in the community because by her wonderful big brother paved the way for her in school, church and community activities. She would often act the opposite way just to be obnoxious and just to keep people off their balance to prove something in the process anyway. Anyway for all that is worth.

Our Gospel parable today turns on three characters in the family that we might feel we already know since we have heard their story so many times through the relationships which we have just described; there is that reckless younger prodigal son who squanders his inheritance and he comes home only when the money runs out; there is the loving father who welcomes the son back with open arms in spite of his waywardness of the younger son ; and finally there is that elder son who was always there, who appears self righteously resentful of the fuss made over his brothers return. This last character is the least likeable of the group because he comes across as a wet blanket because he is spoiled; kind of sullen; and he seems especially uncharitable when he is contrasted by his very gracious father.

At the same time the older son possesses a number of virtues which might be not be obvious at first. He is responsible without a doubt, obedient is a high priority and according to his own accounts him always serves his father loyally, devoting himself to caring for the family property. He is a kind of single minded person who always plays by the rules, he might not be a flashy person but he is always dependable. The older son reminds me of character Radar O'Riley in the old Nash television series and that reminds me, you can still see on TV every night a couple of those episodes. He is the one which quietly organizes the whole operation behind the scenes and if something needs to be done he appears magically to take care of the situation without really calling a whole lot of attention to himself.

The elder's son's problem is he doesn't seem to get much credit for his hard work because he doesn't demand attention. He is often overlooked and sometimes his resentment builds and builds until it reaches a breaking point. As we see in the story the older son's pent up anger finds its way to the surface when his brother comes home. He believes he deserves a lot more recognition than that irresponsible wanderer because he has made so many more personal sacrifices over the course of his life. The elder son for example has always chosen responsibility for the over loose living and when he sees his brother receive a tender embrace, this is precisely

what the older brother desperately desires for his life. He is weary from all his noble efforts, he yearns to be gathered into his father's arms, and told that he is worthwhile as well, But still he has got that pride which prevents him from showing that need, even when the father reaches out ; he remains aloof and estranged in his resentment.

Sometimes I try to get this message across to our kids today that you and I as followers of Jesus, may feel the same way the elder brother did. Being a follower of Jesus involves a while lot of responsibility sometimes. We are called to be faithful in our actions; we are called to look out to those who suffer poverty, and injustice in the world. We are called to be a part of the worshipping community here, week in and week out, which brings us joy obviously, but requires of us quite a commitment. Aren't there times in this calling when it seems downright overwhelming? Don't we often get tired of always being there for example in raising our children or caring for an elderly parent or a sick spouse? Don't we sometimes get tired of holding our tongues to avoid hurting people by what we say; tired of striving to see the larger or global picture as we work for the benefit of others in the world .There are probably times for each of us when the grass seems greener on the other side of our Christian commitment, when we may long to play the world's rules around us for a while; but we go on facing our God, our spouses front and center in the way that we live our lives These are the times when like the eldest son when we become estranged from God, our loving parents and we may become resentful, we may become weary, and in our very weariness may prevent us from turning to God for the reassurance and renewal that we need the most everyday of our lives. In our preoccupation we lose sight of who God really is, forgetting that the God that calls us to discipleship is also the God that welcomes all people in spite of their weaknesses in life with open arms. He who welcomes each one of us in fact whether we realize it or not God's abundant blessings are always there for us as well.

As the father said to his eldest son, you are always with me and everything that I have belongs to you. Lent is the time when we turn back to basic fact of God's grace in our lives and we desperately need to return to that grace day in and day out, don't we? As workers for Jesus we need to hear loud and clear the simple words that God loves us. We are like the moderator of the church who received a hospital visit from her pastor as she lay sick in the hospital. The pastor started to chat about the events about congregation as sometimes, we pastor's do, until the woman finally interrupted him and said, "Pastor excuse me but I am facing a pretty frightening thing right now, won't you just plainly say what I need to hear from you today."The pastor said quietly, "You and I are imperfect human beings but God loves each of us deeply so put your trust in God like a little child."And the woman responded, "Thank you that is something that I can get a hold of and hang

on to.” That simple message I think is what we yearn for, I think it is God’s embrace, I think it calls us out of our preoccupation with cares of this world, it calls us out of our weariness, it calls us out of our times of resentment, it calls us what I would like to say is home- a place for God beloved children in this world and in the world to come. So the father said to his eldest son, “Son you are always with me and everything that I have is yours, it was fitting to make merry and be glad for this your brother was dead and is now alive. He was lost but now he is found. AMEN.