

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 26, 2010
Lessons: Psalm 137:1-4, Jeremiah 31:1-3,8,9 and Luke 15:25-32

LOST AT HOME

Sibling rivalry is as old as the human race. As the center of her own universe, the baby learns to expect attention paid to her, interest and delight lavished upon her, face to face contact focused on her face, not some rival's. Suddenly there is a new baby in the house, and the former star of the everyday show recedes into the background.

“My, my, isn't she the most adorable little thing? Hi, precious! What's your name? How's baby?” The young mother smiles as the older woman stoops to admire her baby in the stroller. The older brother, standing by, does not smile. As they walk away, he says to himself, but loudly enough for his mother to hear, “If she'd asked me, I'd have said I'm six. I would have told her I go to school and can ride a bike. But she didn't ask me.” That vignette comes from a comic strip (*For Better or For Worse*)¹ sent to me by a friend who said it had taught her always to speak first to the older child before making a fuss over the baby.

The natural world may look serene to us, once we have tamed it to our well-kept lawns and gardens, but nature is driven by fierce and deadly competition every minute of every day. Last Monday as dawn approached, we were pleased to see an owl fly over our yard. A short time later, the owl flew over again, this time holding something in its talons, with two tiny feet dangling. As we picnic in our yards or just sit enjoying their peacefulness, countless tiny creatures are killed and devoured all around us.

The animal part of human nature competes to thrive. Survival is not good enough for us. Having more brain power than the animals, we seek to flourish and prosper. We set up systems in which having the drive, courage, and cunning to outdo others becomes a virtue to be rewarded. In our society, the very idea that all should prosper seems somehow wrong, even, to some, immoral. In our systems, only the worthy should triumph, and prosperity is indeed a matter of triumph. We teach our children that life is not a gift but a prize to be won, and there are not enough prizes for everyone, especially not when the most competitive require continual triumphs over the rest. We live in a society that measures virtue by wealth and influence. The poor among us become objects of scorn, as though poverty itself were indecent and immoral. So it is that we make our choices to live by competition and glory in victories over each other. The big-brained animal is the most competitive of all.

But we have choices. We do not have to teach our children to live as animals. We can teach them, instead, to be human beings created in the image and likeness of God to care for God's world and for each other. We can teach them, further, to be persons within the human community — neighbors and even sisters and brothers who make choices based upon relationship rather than self-centered isolation from their competitors in society. But do we praise our children for caring about others or for winning? We reward triumphs, but what about sacrifices of their own advantage in the race? Children learn very quickly what brings them approval and pride and what brings them shame or even disgust, and in our society what brings shame is losing, and losing includes just being ordinary and not outstanding.

God delights in faithful love, compassion, kindness, self-sacrifice for the sake others perhaps unworthy of it, humility, and mutual respect among God's children. Those things in which God delights are the truly spiritual in human life — not religiosity but compassion, not moralism but forgiveness, not certitude about life or religion but trust in God and wonder at God's goodness and mercy. There is a spiritual truth about us — a calling to be more than big-brained animals who thrive on winning life's competitions.

Cooperation is for the weak. We may not agree with that statement, but our society communicates it to our children every day. The strong cooperate with others only for additional advantage, or so it seems in our daily world, where the most ruthless of billionaires are treated as heroes and benefactors even as they continue to bloat their empires by sucking life from the poor all around the globe and now turn their lust upon our schools to devour them for profit. In the first of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels, which are not really about magic at all but about our choices in life, a possessed and soon to be destroyed wizard, slave of the dark lord, tells Harry, whom he plans to kill, what his master has taught him. "I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it."²

Jesus offers us a higher, more truly human view of life, in keeping with the Spirit of God and God's intent in creating the big-brained, choice-capable creature. We do not have to live on the level of our animal nature, as the most cunning and dangerous of nature's predators.

The remarkable father in Jesus' parable has lost both his sons. One was lost in a far country; the other is lost at home, where he works like a slave because he has not accepted himself as a son. It's not about the work as such. It's his attitude toward himself, his father, and the once-brother he so bitterly resents. Why, he wants to know, has his father honored and favored his no-account son over the faithful one who has done the work of two in the hot sun? Why is the no-good, unworthy son given the best for a celebration of his return? The

key to understanding what is happening in this parable, as in human life, comes when the righteous elder brother, pouring out his resentment upon his father, calls the younger now returned, “your son,” which our version translates pointedly for its meaning as, “this son of yours.”³ Brother disowns brother. “Your son,” not “my brother.” Does he not realize that he thereby also disowns himself from family? If my father’s son is not my brother, then who am I? Before leaving home, the younger son, the one we call the “prodigal,” disowned his father by taking his inheritance as though his father had died. Now, the elder disowns his father as well, by denying relationship with his brother. That’s how sin works.

To be human spiritually is to be in relationship with God and, therefore, with each other. Sin is not just wrongdoing any more than pneumonia is just a fever. The wrongs are only the symptoms. Sin is alienation, estrangement from God and the human community, autonomy without compassion. Lack of empathy with others is the source of all the hurtful wrongs, the evils, done in this world. Because we do not share each other’s griefs and pains, we will not celebrate each other’s joys but only resent them. Because he will not let himself care about his brother, the elder son will not go into the house and join the celebration.

Or will he? We don’t know because the parable just ends, leaving open the question of the elder brother’s response to his father’s plea that he recognize his lost brother as his brother so both can be restored to the family. We don’t know the outcome because Jesus did not know the outcome, either, although I suspect he was at least beginning to realize that overcoming our estrangement was going to require much more from him than parables.

In reply to his older son’s dismissal of his brother as “this son of yours,” the father corrects him, saying, “your brother” or, as our translation puts it, “this brother of yours.” Seeing us all as children of God, Jesus puts before us the relationships we deny: this brother of yours, this sister of yours. The parable is left open without a conclusion because the door is still left open for us to choose between our animal nature and our spiritual nature — not by becoming super religious or self-consciously moral, but by affirming relationship so that compassion can outdo competition, so empathy can make us humanize the people we would dismiss, and so we can affirm in practice our true identity as daughters and sons of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus. Amen.

Notes:

1. Lynn Johnston, *For Better or For Worse*, Universal Press Syndicate.
2. *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, p. 291.
3. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).