

October 7, 2012 World Communion Sunday “Brothers?” Luke 15:11-32 Genesis 4:1-16

The two lessons we heard read today told about brothers, brothers who did not do such a great job of loving each other. According to the Bible, Cain, the first child ever born, resented the fact that when he and his brother worshiped, God preferred Abel's offering over Cain's offering. Even though God saw Cain's unhappiness and warned him about it, Cain plotted his brother's demise, inviting him to go out into the field, and then killing him. After the murder, God asked Cain, “Where is your brother?” Murderer Cain lied outright, saying, essentially, “How should I know? Am I my brother's keeper?”

Today, World Communion Sunday, as we glance around the world and realize that all kinds of folks are our brothers and sisters in Christ, we do well to consider these “brothers” of the Bible. Our Lord Jesus has called us to love one another, even as he has loved us, but it is HARD to love each other, whether we're talking about “near” brothers and sisters or “far away” brothers and sisters.

World Communion Sunday. Christians in every country are sharing the Communion meal and trying to realize that all of us – whether in communist countries or democratic countries, those who speak Arabic, English, Chinese, French, Spanish, those who have an easy time of it going to church and those who risk hard persecutions for being Christian - are invited to Jesus' table and will some day come together at Christ's amazing heavenly banquet.

When I was a child, heaven seemed appealing, for I envisioned it as a place where everybody smiled and had a fun time. But I didn't really like the idea of having to sit on a cloud and play a harp... When I realized that God would have it so that each person would be free to really use the unique gifts he/she had been given, heaven seemed okay again. But later, as my own life progressed and became more complicated, I started having more trouble with heaven... Am I going to have to face people I've let down through the years? Will the people I find really offensive be part of my heaven? Will I have to share a room with the Christians who hurt my Jewish friend so badly when I was in high school? And what about the Christians who told me I would go to hell because I was not a Southern Baptist or because I was a preaching woman: will they be down the hall from me?

Just because we're Christian in a free country does not mean that it's always so easy to love or even appreciate our brothers and sisters!

Of course, heaven will have us all healed, I believe; God's “shalom” will become reality, so the concerns I just listed will not be problems at all. We will be so close to God's heart and see the love of Jesus so clearly that our own hearts will become pure and totally able to forgive and rejoice.

But for now, to be a Christian and to claim all Christians as our brothers and sisters can be a huge faith-challenge, one which would be impossible were it not for the presence of our Lord Jesus with us. In him, we are called to forgive each other, to work with each other even when we don't like each other or agree with one another, and to keep our eyes, not on our own angers or comparisons or competitions, but on our Lord. We are not to let our resentments or insecurities poison us the

way Cain's did. And we are to make sure that we remember the story (Luke 15) of the two sons and their loving father as we try to discern God's way for our lives.

The Gospel story of the Father who had two sons is written for us. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has some of the best insights I have come across about this story, so I share her words with you now. "Jesus told a story about a younger son who was so hungry to see the world that he wished his own father dead – at least symbolically – by asking him to settle his estate early and give both brothers their share. So the father – apparently valuing his child's freedom more than his own security – divided his livelihood and said goodbye to his younger son, who went off and squandered everything until one day he 'came to himself.' That was when he decided to go home, composing a pretty calculated confession as he went, one designed to get him back with a roof over his head and food in his belly even if it meant he had to live as a servant and not as a son.

"He came home, in other words, to live off his *brother's* inheritance, having spent his own in loose living, and no sooner did his father see him coming down the road than the elder brother's fatted calf was killed and the celebration was on. There were no extra steps between the younger son's return and his welcome home party, no heart-to-heart with the old man, no extra chores, no go-to-your-room-for-a-week-and-think-about-what-you-have-done, just a clean robe for his back, a fine ring for his hand, and a pair of new sandals for his feet. The father did not even wait for the elder son to get home from work before beginning the festivities....Then the elder son came home from the fields, heard the music and the dancing, and I am glad I was not the one who had to tell him what it was all about." (*The Preaching Life*, p. 164)

After telling of her own identification with the older son, Taylor continues: "...God help the elder son. God help him, and God help all of us who understand his rage, who have felt so excluded and whose hurt has run so deep that we have cut ourselves off from the very ones whose love and acceptance we so desperately need. 'This son of yours, the elder brother says, excluding himself from the family – this son of yours who is no kin to me, nor am I kin to you if you are going to choose him over me.'

"But here is where the loving father earns his title. He does not take a swing at his firstborn, as some of us might have been tempted to do, or even remind him to honor his father. He knows that he has lost both of his sons. He has lost the younger to a life of recklessness, but he has lost the older one to a more serious fate, to a life of angry self-righteousness that takes him so far away from his father that he might as well be feeding pigs in a far country. He wants his father to love him as he deserves to be loved, because he has stayed put, and followed orders, and done the right thing.

"He wants his father to love him for all of that and his father *does* love him, but not for any of that, any more than he loves either of his sons according to what they *deserve*. He just loves them, more because of who he is than because of who they are, and the elder brother cannot stand it. He cannot stand a love that transcends right and wrong, a love that throws homecoming parties for prodigal sinners and expects the hard-working righteous to rejoice....so he stands outside – outside his father's house and outside his father's love–refusing his invitation to come inside.

“But his father turns out to be prodigal, too, at least as far as his love is concerned. He never seems to tire of giving it away. ‘Son,’ he says, reclaiming the boy, ‘you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’ ... ‘We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours’ (not *my* son but *your* brother) ‘was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’

“It is the elder brother’s invitation back into relationship not only with the loving father, but also with the wayward brother. It is an invitation to recognize his own lostness and foundness, but the parable does not tell us how it all turned out. The story ends with the elder brother standing outside the house in the yard with his father, listening to the party going on inside. ***Perhaps Jesus leaves it that way because it is up to each one of us to finish the story.*** It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside all alone being right, or give up our rights and go inside to take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels, brothers and sisters united only by our relationship to one loving father, who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be prevented from giving us the love we need.” (*The Preaching Life*, pp 166-167 -bold added by fte)

WE are the brothers, and sisters. This is our story now.

Cain, as a result of his sin, lied to God and demanded, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The older brother sulked over the unfairness of the Father’s grace shown to his younger brother. Today, we struggle with our own attitudes and resentments. It’s hard to be part of this faith family! God understands only too well, but God also invites us to a better and higher way.

In a few minutes we will come to Christ’s table to take bread and juice we have not earned and do not deserve... The love, forgiveness and healing power of our Savior are what makes His invitation to all of us possible. May we feed on him and be thankful, and may we find strength to do our best to love our brothers and sisters, in Christ’s name. Amen.