

SERMON: Family Drama

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

In my family, I am the youngest of five children. The two boys came first – Billy and Jimmy. Then came my sister, Carole. That was it. Well, that was supposed to be it; you know how it goes. Seven years later, my sister, Emily arrived on the scene, and 18 months after that came the cutest one of all! I'm told Emily had just one word for me when I was introduced to her: "Away."

Like any family, we had our share of FAMILY DRAMA.

I was so young when my brothers were teenagers, I really have little to no memory of them or their relationship. But as I got older, I sensed that Bill, the eldest, didn't really care much for Jimmy. But it was Bill who had to come home from college early on a weekday morning, to inform my mother that Jimmy had had an asthma attack and died the night before. I can't imagine what a heavy burden that was to bear. It's the kind of traumatic event that would stay with anyone for a very long time. To my knowledge, Bill never talked about it, and never talked about Jimmy at all.

Years later, when I shared a long car ride with Bill, I asked him. He said that he and Jimmy never really got along. They were just too different. Ok, that's fair. But then when my father died, and Bill gave the eulogy, he mentioned that my dad had raised four children. I was so taken aback I don't think I heard anything he said after that. "Four children? You mean five children. It shouldn't be too many to count. Why would he leave out Jimmy?"

Maybe I misunderstood. But I was offended. I knew that Bill always seemed to have a chip on his shoulder about Jimmy, but I never knew he would take it this far. To act like he never existed? That's pretty extreme.

I've always wondered if Bill felt neglected or left out as a child. Jimmy got a lot of attention and special treatment because he was sick, a lot. My dad had to work three jobs to pay for all the medical bills, so he wasn't around much. Jimmy was allergic to so many things. We could never have pets, except for goldfish and small turtles. The bedroom the boys shared was the only room in the house that had an air conditioner; Jimmy needed it to help his breathing. But since they shared the room, Bill enjoyed that advantage as well. But maybe Bill didn't get everything he wanted growing up.

Maybe he felt like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. If you've ever studied birth order, you know that it is the eldest child who is typically the responsible one, the well-behaved one, the one who does everything he's told and who follows all the rules. And then they get all huffy when their good behavior is neither appreciated nor rewarded.

Whether you're a first-born or not, it is easy for most of us to put ourselves in the older brother's place and see this story from his perspective. So, let's talk about him first.

We can get so wrapped up in the drama of the younger son's rebellious antics and the father's elation at his return that we almost forget there's an older brother. In fact, the party to welcome the younger son home starts without him. Ok, that's gotta hurt. So no one can blame him when he becomes angry and refuses to join the celebration.

“His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, *Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came*

back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him! Then the father said to him, *Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.*”

Now, let's step into the father's shoes for a moment. It's been years since he has seen or heard from his son. He thought he might never see him again. Of course, he would rather that the boy never left home at all, but you can't make someone love you or force him to fit a mold not meant for him. Maybe leaving was the best way for him to learn about the world. This father's prayer was only that his son would return safe and sound.

As it turns out, the younger son *did* learn that home was not such a bad place after all. All that wild living wasn't worth what it had cost him. While slopping the pigs, he realized that even his father's hired hands enjoyed a better life. If he had to spend the rest of his life paying his father back, he would gladly do it.

I think we all know that the father in this story is our Father God in heaven, whose love is extravagant and whose grace is amazing. All of us at one time or another have strayed, though some further than others. The goal is for everyone to

come back home, for everyone to know how much they are loved and wanted, for everyone to feast on the fatted calf and to take part in the celebration.

If you grew up in the church, you learned that this story was known as the prodigal son. The boy who was wasteful, reckless, extravagant. But more recently, scholars are beginning to refer to it as the story of the lost son. This parable is part of a series of parables on lost things. Chapter 15 in Luke begins with Jesus telling about the lost sheep, then the lost coin, and finally, the lost son.

There is a celebration when the shepherd, who left the 99 sheep to go search for one who is lost, returns, having found it. “Rejoice with me,” the shepherd says, “for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Jesus ends the story, saying, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

There is a celebration when the woman who lost one coin finds it. She calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” And Jesus comments, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The father holds a celebration when his son who was lost returns home. And he desires his older son to join the celebration, saying, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Think of the shape of the cross. In his death, Jesus reached out to draw us back in, to connect us with one another. And as he took his last breath, he pointed the way home, the way back to God.

This is the ministry of reconciliation given to us by God, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the early Christians in Corinth. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

Reconciliation happens at the Lord’s Table, where all are invited and all are welcome. Communion – coming together – with Christ and with one another is where we all may feast on God’s amazing grace and abundant love. At the Lord’s Table there is a place for all who were lost and have been found; there is a place for those who remain lost and have yet to be found. Here, may we gain the

strength we need to go out and find them and bring them home... to the glory of
God!

AMEN.