

## **New Testament Reading Luke 15: 25-32**

Sermon- **Lost in Plain Sight- the Elder Son**, August 2, 2015

### **Part Three**

This past week Brian and I took my younger sister, Sheila, on a little road trip getaway for a few days. Sheila, was visiting us from “a far country”...Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. We went to “the chalet,” a family gathering place on the side of Blue Mountain near Owen Sound. The chalet is a wonderful getaway, where you can ski, snowshoe, skate, or snowboard, in the winter, and hike, bike, swim, or sail, in the summer. The chalet is “in the family,” but it technically belongs to our brother’s family. The only rule at the chalet is to come and enjoy yourselves. Everyone is welcome including friends. The more the merrier! The chalet itself is gorgeous with multiple levels, beds for everyone and all the amenities of home. At the back of the chalet is a creek flowing down the mountain side. If you leave the windows open at night, the creek provides “white noise”...giving a perfect, restful sleep.

The first morning that we were there, I arrived for breakfast wearing my Mum’s old housecoat. My sister remarked “I have seen that housecoat before!” It was then that I noticed what she was wearing... a big, white, fluffy terry housecoat that you might see at a spa! I joked with her...”and what did you do to deserve that housecoat! Here I am wearing Mum’s old housecoat, and you show up as if you think you are at a spa or something?” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt like the elder prodigal sister, eyeing my younger sister’s housecoat with envy.

Sharon piped up and said “Oh don’t worry Monica, there are at least three of those housecoats in every bedroom and bathroom in the chalet. And sure enough...it was true...When I took my eyes off Sheila in her swanky white housecoat, I noticed for the first time that in my own bedroom where I had slept many times before, that there were indeed multiple housecoats for me to choose from. I picked out my own fluffy white housecoat to wear, and enjoyed the rest of the visit even more with the knowledge that now being at the chalet was just like being at the spa! Lesson learned...there were plenty of housecoats to go around!

On the drive home, I reflected that it was possible that if I could see something theological in a housecoat that perhaps I had spent one too many weeks working on this sermon series!

Nevertheless...this modern day contemporary story put a humorous slant on the Biblical parable, which I call the Elder Son- Hiding in Plain Sight.

At this point in the story, the narrative focuses on the elder son/brother...I call him the elder prodigal son, lost in plain sight. When the younger brother comes home and all the fuss starts happening in the compound, the dutiful older brother is out working in the fields... perhaps even working overtime. When he returns home after work, the party has already started! He asks one of the servants what is going on. “Your brother is back, and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast.” We are celebrating because of his safe return.

The older brother is dumbfounded... for a time he is silent, processing what has just happened.

Unlike his younger brother who is very transparent with his thoughts, at this point in the story the older brother is still hiding what he is thinking.

Perhaps we can try to read his mind...

*Cause for a celebration! Are you kidding me? After all that he put us through? He doesn't deserve anything but a swift kick in the pants...after thumbing his nose at my father, wishing he were dead, making us the laughing stock of the whole community. Maybe I should have taken my inheritance too...Living it up with prostitutes...that sounds like a plan...I bet he had the time of his life. And what about me slaving away at home? Feeding and fattening up our prized bull...then sacrificed for HIM...that disrespectful son of a gun...unbelievable! Was nobody going to tell me about the party? Am I not invited? What do I get for all my hard work and loyalty?*

The seething anger and resentment that the elder brother felt for so long against both his younger brother and his father comes to a roaring boil.

The father comes out looking for the older brother and begs him to come in to the party.... But the older brother rebukes his father harshly. He can no longer control himself. 'Look! All these years I've been **slaving** for you and never disobeyed your orders. "Yet you never gave me so much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when **this son of yours** who has squandered your property **with prostitutes** comes home, you kill the

fattened calf for him!' ..... As the expression goes, it's all in the phrasing! Is there any evidence that the younger brother had spent any time with prostitutes? No! ... Why did the elder brother refer to his brother as "this son of yours"? Had he indeed written his brother off? Do you notice the judgment in his inferences and his tone of voice! What sticks out to me is the two J's- Judgment and Jealousy...

Remember that this section of the story is the climax of Jesus' teaching just before his crucifixion. Jesus was trying to reach deep into the hearts of the Pharisees. They were the respected religious leaders of the day but they just did not understand Jesus' teaching and they did not recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah. It is true...The Pharisees were experts in the law- all 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments... yes 365 negative commandments...one negative commandment for each day of the year! You may remember hearing Pastor Jonathan read this list of categories of commandments last fall. They were subdivided into 34 categories! There is no doubt in my mind that keeping the law was a tremendous burden! *Just listening to the titles of the categories was exhausting.*

And for the elder son, living in the home of his father is also a burden. You see the eldest son in the story keeps ALL the laws, dots all the I's and crosses all the Ts- the jots and tittles of the law...just like the Pharisees. From an outsiders' perspective, the eldest son is a picture of respectability. After all, it is the younger son who is the black sheep in the family...everyone knows HIS story! But under his respectable façade, the elder son is just as selfish and self-centred as his younger brother. He is detached, angry, bitter and judgmental too. How do we know this?

Well, the younger son's return to the household is a monumental event...word of his arrival spreads very quickly amongst the extended family and servants and the neighbouring landowners...all the attention is on the wayward, returning son. The smell of the cooking of the fattened calf no doubt would have attracted attention. But the elder son is detached, cold and disengaged. He is out in the field, fulfilling his duty...does he purposefully ignore his brother's homecoming? ... does he not care that his brother had come home? it is possible...we don't know...

Nevertheless, the waiting Father responds to the elder son with love and grace, **overlooking** his disrespectful, sinful behaviour. "Look dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day... for your brother was dead and has come back to life. He was lost, but now he is found."

Despite what the elder brother thought, the grace that the father showed his younger son was not "cheap grace." His generous, loving, and accepting attitude towards his son was very costly to him. Remember, the father lost his reputation, he permanently lost 1/3 of his property and possessions, he lost the fellowship of his sons with himself and with one another, he lost sleep, and he lost peace of mind. The embarrassed father had been subject to the local gossip and hearsay about his younger son. However, the father did not withdraw into despair. After all he still had another son under his care, and he still needed to provide for him and the extended household. Meanwhile he hoped and prayed and looked for the return of his son, all the while fattening a calf in hope and anticipation of his future homecoming. The story's ending is left open...did the elder son repent and come to the party...we don't know...we don't know...

So what is God's message for you and me today? Let's spend some time in self-reflection.

If you identify with the older son, it is important to reflect on your understanding of God! Do you see God the Father as a characterization of the Great Scrooge, hanging over the balcony of heaven, looking to catch you enjoying yourself so that he can yell "Stop that!!! Are you a child of God who behaves like a hired servant? Do you secretly have a checklist of do's and don'ts that you feel must be marked off to win God's approval? Are you doing all the right things for all the wrong reasons? Do you hold God at arm's length, letting God only get so close? Are you afraid that if God really knew you, that God would love you less? Do you feel that you don't deserve to wear the swanky white housecoat? Have you ever asked God to throw you a party in all these years?

It is sometimes difficult to see ourselves in the elder prodigal son/brother "in hiding." However, many of us who have been affiliated with the church for a long time may actually be more like the elder son. On the outside, like the Pharisees, we may be doing everything "right" and doing everything that is expected of us. But it is the attitude of our hearts that betray us. We may have lost "the joy of the Lord". The Bible reminds us that it is "out of the heart that the mouth speaks." We may be judgmental and harbour a spirit of unforgiveness and bitterness towards others. We may be proud or mean-spirited. Like the Pharisees, we may feel that we have a monopoly on the Truth...a holier than thou attitude...a disdain for others who are not like us...holding other children of God at arm's length. This attitude is often clearly evident to

others around us, even if we are blind to it. The elder son's example shows us that we can be lost, even when we are home, in our case, home in the fellowship of the Church.

If we identify with the waiting Father, and have experienced the pain of watching family members wandering away from the Shepherd and staying away from the Shepherd like lost sheep, or like prodigal sons/daughters, rest assured that God the Father is constantly watching for our loved ones from afar off and is longing for their return. As much as you love this your lost one, rest assured that God loves him/her infinitely more. Let's follow God's example of praying and watching for their return as well. Do not give up. Pray without ceasing... Stay connected with them if at all possible... Be generous with your love and grace.

Finally, for those that we have loved and lost, commit your loved ones to the care of our loving heavenly Father. Remember, that as much as we have cared for and loved the prodigals in our lives, God welcomes and embraces them with His **perfect** love and forgiveness.

Jesus' message to the Pharisees, to the tax collectors, the sinners and the prostitutes and to us is that there is **no one** righteous... **no one** able to keep the whole law... we are all sinners saved by God's grace... infinitely valued by him. Remember that there is **no hierarchy of sin** with God. Although selfishness manifested itself differently in the behavior of the two sons, in God's economy it is still sin. In Ephesians 2 we read, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may

boast.” This gift of salvation is God’s gift to us...in my metaphor of this week... the white housecoats are a gift of the host...for everyone.

It is my prayer that each of us will continuously experience God’s grace in a life-changing way, and experience the freedom that His grace brings. In turn may we also be kind, gracious and forgiving towards others... people that have hurt us, people who can no longer make amends, people who cannot find it in themselves to apologize, people who have abandoned us, or have followed a different path from ours, or who hold a different point of view from ours. Remember that being lost, also means being highly valued...Above all...God loves us, God wants to be in an intimate relationship with us, and God calls us to return to him. Just as we are...without one plea...accepting that Jesus shed his blood for us...let us return to the father who has infinite love for all of his prodigals... all children of God. AMEN

Monica McClure, August 2, 2015, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Whitby