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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z17, K9
4 Lent (Year C) 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Eucharist
Sunday 31 March 2019
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Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
1 Cor. 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3,11b-
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Donald Trump, the Prodigal Son

"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" (Lk. 15).

Have you ever wondered how Jesus has changed you from what you might otherwise have been?

In case you have not noticed by now, I am an older brother. This is more important for understanding me than knowing where I grew up or went to college, my Myers-Briggs score, zodiac sign or what I own. It matters more than almost anything else about me. I am that oldest brother all the way down to the invisible depths of my soul.

Parents dream that their children will love, protect and care for each other.¹ We hope that long after we have left this earth they will be the best of friends. They will be the only ones who remember the ordinary days that we shared together as a family, the way that we all laughed together at bath time, or our family visits to Santa Cruz in the spring. But this is not possible unless older siblings and younger ones understand themselves and how they are related to God.

There is so much about younger siblings that I admire. So often they seem so independent and unencumbered. They appear to be so much more free of the burden that I always felt to be pleasing my parents.²

As the older one, I felt proud that my brother Andrew admired me. Growing up I always thought I should be teaching him something. One spring day, I taught him how to tackle people – by repeatedly tackling him. I still long for those days in high school and college when we used to come home from rugby practice together talking about our days.

But the relationship was more complex than this implies. I'll never forget one hot July morning when we were in elementary school. Before anyone else woke up my brother went out to our vegetable garden and pulled up all the squash plants and stomped on them. Oh, I'll never forget that stern tone of righteous indignation in my voice. "Andrew what have you done!"

All the while in my heart I was rejoicing. Where do we get the primal sense that if our parents are mad at our sibling, then they will love us more? If only I had known then that my brother was destined to become a vegetarian. See I'm still doing it, all these years later!

The Bible says so much about the relationship between siblings and what this means for God. The Bible seems pretty realistic when it comes to brothers. It gives us a very mixed picture of this relationship. Biblical brothers compete for attention and fight, they also cooperate and forgive each other.

The tension between the first set of brothers rises to the point that Cain kills Abel. Crafty Jacob with his mother's help cheats his brother Esau out of their father Isaac's blessing. Joseph's brothers resent their father's favorite son so much that they leave him in a ditch to die. The good news is that both Jacob and Joseph eventually become reconciled with their brothers. Despite terrible differences, faith in God makes it possible for them to cross the bridge of understanding.³

In the New Testament Simon and Andrew, James and John represent the ultimate example of cooperating brothers. None of the gospels mentions conflict between them. Knowing what I do about families and the unreliability of disciples, I think that this might be the greatest miracle Jesus performs.

When the religious leaders complain that Jesus spends his time with the sinners, rule-breakers and outlaws he proposes a fundamentally different philosophy of life. He does this through three stories about God's love. He describes the effort God takes to seek out the lost. God is like a woman looking for a coin, or a shepherd seeking a sheep. Then he tells one of the most important stories in the Bible, the Prodigal Son.

Jesus talks about the mysterious God through an example that we understand – family life. But we often misinterpret this story. It begins abruptly. The younger brother seems to be saying to the father, "You are dead to me now. I want my share of the inheritance so that I can move to the Near Eastern equivalent of Las Vegas." And that's what he does. He burns through the money quickly with adult film stars. Then in order to stay alive he lives in shame among unclean animals as a pig keeper.

I don't believe that we are supposed to see ourselves as this younger brother. This may sound controversial, but for me the younger brother is similar to how San Francisco liberals picture Donald Trump. At no point does the younger brother repent. He never accepts that he has done anything wrong. Because of bad choices his life just becomes unbearable and so he goes looking for a more regular meal. The younger brother

rehearses the story that he hopes will convince his father to take him in, but he doesn't believe it himself.⁴

The father sees him at a distance because in one way or other he has been looking for his son ever since he left. I tell my daughter that a father will do any embarrassing thing just to get his child to smile. And in this spirit, the father doesn't care at all about what people think of him. With no dignity, just sheer joy he hikes up his robes and goes off running to meet his child. Before the younger son can say his rehearsed speech the father has embraced him with unconditional acceptance.

Later we realize that the older brother cannot stand this. He thinks that his father has been deceived. He understands that nothing has changed in his brother's heart at all, that the whole repentance is a con. So he skulks outside and refuses to go into the party. He confronts the father with such bitterness. "You never gave me a party." But my brother, "devoured your property with prostitutes," while I have been working like a slave for you.

This older brother is like the religious leaders of the day. They see through the kind of people who flock to Jesus, the scammers, frauds, liars and manipulators. They think Jesus does not know what they are like because they share an assumption with the older brother. They think repentance works like this: First, a person has to change his or her ways and then say sorry. If this is convincing enough the offended person *might* grant them forgiveness.

What the religious leaders, and for that matter we ourselves, fail to recognize is that Jesus has a completely different philosophy. Jesus points out that by its nature mercy is not fair. Like love or joy, it exists on a higher plane. It is above fairness.⁵ God is like the father who loves so deeply that he ceases to care about how he looks, his reputation or just about anything else. God simply loves. We have been loved into existence.

For Jesus who welcomed deceivers and thieves, and for God, grace does not come *after* repentance. Grace makes repentance possible. God invites everyone who feels offended by the others who have been called. God says to us, "Celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Lk. 15).

I heard a story this week about a woman's relationship with her father. She said that when she was growing up there was always one occasion when she felt especially close to her dad. During family parties with all of her aunts, uncles and cousins there would usually come a time when someone would start playing polka records. After awhile they

would play the "Beer Barrel Polka." Every time they did this, her father would come up to her, tap her shoulder and say, "I do believe this is our dance." She had the fondest memories of how they would whirl across the floor.⁶

At one of these family parties she was a teenager and in attendance against her will. She was in a dark teenage mood. When the "Beer Barrel Polka" started to play, her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I do believe this is our dance." She glared at him and said, "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" He turned away and never asked her to dance again.

Through high school the woman loved to go out to parties. She would come back home so late and it infuriated her that her sleepy father would be sitting on the couch in an old plaid bathrobe. Disdainfully she would say, "what are you doing?" And he would say, "I was just waiting for you."

The woman was glad to move out of the house to attend a distant college. For years she didn't even call, but over time she began to miss her father. When a new job brought her closer to home, she actually decided to go to one of those family parties. As you might expect someone put on the "Beer Barrel Polka." She drew a deep breath, walked over to her father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I do believe this is our dance." He turned to her and said, "I was just waiting for you."

I am the older brother. But Jesus has changed me from what I otherwise would have been. He has helped me to more often let go and to exist on that plane that is above fairness and keeping score. Jesus has helped me to see that the wildly irrational love I have for my children lies at the heart of all things.

God is just waiting for us. God says, "everything that I have is yours. Come into the party. Your sins and your accomplishments are less important than my love."

¹ At the ages of five and three at Christmas time our pot-bellied children put bubbles on their faces and in the deepest voice they were capable of they would do us, "Ho, Ho, Ho. What do you want for Christmas?" Our answer was always the same. "We want our children to be nice to each other." At that point they would hold out a handful of bubbles and say, "Here is your children being nice to each other."

² I believe this makes my brother even more creative, more bold about taking risks than he otherwise would have been. When I was seven we moved to the city. My parents still laugh about my brother striding up to our neighbor and saying, "Hi my name is Malcolm and I'm seven." "That's my brother Andrew, he's only four."

³ When Joseph's brothers realize that he has become ruler of Egypt, the Bible says "they could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence" (Gen. 45). They expected revenge not love. Joseph completely lets them off the hook. He says God was the one who sent him into slavery, so that their family

could be saved. Joseph believes so strongly that God is present when brothers meet each other in love. He is right. But it is difficult to stop being an older or younger brother.

⁴ Much of this interpretation of the Prodigal Son comes from Matt and Liz Boulton, "Lost and Found: SALT's Lectionary Commentary on 4 Lent," SALT, 26 March 2019. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/26/lost-and-found-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-4>

⁵ Matt and Liz Boulton, "Lost and Found: SALT's Lectionary Commentary on 4 Lent," SALT, 26 March 2019.

⁶ Thomas Long, "Is There Joy in God's House?" *Day1*, 21 March 2004. http://day1.org/471-is_there_joy_in_gods_house