

# The Archetypal Older Brother

**SUNDAY, AUGUST 7, 2011**

**KOINONIA**

Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy

First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
*145 Capital Ave., NE*  
*Battle Creek, MI 49017*  
269·965·1225  
[www.fccb.org](http://www.fccb.org)

August 7, 2011

Luke 15:11-32

We had Koinonia Bible Study at my house on Thursday night. There were 8 of us in the room as we read the Prodigal Son. At one point in the evening I asked folks which character they related to the most in the text. 7 people related to feelings of being the unchosen one, the loyal, hard-working, responsible yet invisible child, the unloved and unhappy person outside the party, seething with betrayal and envy, not hearing the words of love by the father because the disappointment at being the second class sibling pierce too deeply. 7 out of 8. I was the only person who related to the feelings of being entitled and immature, irresponsible and reckless, unworthy of returning home, and undeserving of the grace “home” showered on me when turning my life around. There was 1 person who talked about the importance of forgiveness between the father and younger son and how she could relate to that. But predominantly the older brother was alive and well in the room. The older brother gets people, or perhaps people get the older brother.

I think he should be given archetypal status, he and Martha (as in sister of Mary). They were probably distant cousins. The older brother is the epitome of the American Dream and the Nuclear Family loyalist. He is the one who believes that if he works hard and obeys his father’s rules, everything is going to go according to his plan. He is the one who thinks he deserves all that he wants because the systems of privilege in his day have prioritized him that way. And he is the one who ends up feeling cheated, pissed off, and betrayed.

Now when I say systems of privilege, let me be specific about what system I am talking about. I am talking about patriarchy and class exploitation. Two things it’s important to notice in this story: #1 slavery is a part of this household;

the father has what he has and the brothers have what they have because “hired help” makes it possible. We do not hear any of the names of these workers; they are only mentioned in passing and only brought into the story when they serve (literally) the purposes of the father and older son. This is entirely consistent with the wealthy land-owner culture of Rome and patriarchal culture that prioritizes eldest sons in Judaism—both cultures present in the hearing of this story. Now given that this story is a parable and it’s Jesus attempting to describe God’s grace, we might want to question the validity of assuming that God (who is represented by the Father) owns slaves. There are a lot of things wrong with that on a many levels and no, it isn’t dismissible because it’s reflective of its time. #2 women are entirely invisible in this story. Where is mom? Where are the sisters or grandmothers? Apparently it doesn’t matter. Or does it? Does it matter? Do the systems of class hierarchy and women’s invisibility create the kind of justified entitlement we see in the older brother?

One thing we do know about him is that he’d much rather receive stuff than be near to those he loves. For him, it’s the stuff that matters, it’s being the prized one, the most important, the center of attention. And maybe that’s inevitable. When you are brought up in a system that prioritizes over all things maleness, ownership and high social rank, maybe it’s inevitable that older sons wind up with these expectations.

But how sad for him, not only because he’s missing out on love that isn’t idolatrous, but also because he’s not happy!

Fast forward to the last scene. He is the one soaked through with betrayal, envy and disappointment. He stands outside the party, unable to dance because his heart is hardened. He is the chip on the shoulder sibling, the one who looks on from a distance with arms crossed, head cocked and eyes scrunched up in bitterness. He is the self-righteous one who can describe in intimate detail all the reasons why he should

be showered with attention, but who can't make sense out of why he feels so alone, unseen and untouched by those around him. He's got dreams deferred. He's got broken relationship. And he is self-exiled from the very home where those dreams and relationships took shape. Painful place to be.

Painful, yet inevitable. Inevitable because lies always get seen and felt for what they are eventually. Truth is: women shouldn't be invisible. Truth is: no human being's economic stability or excess should be earned on the back of anyone else. The idols of male supremacy and class exploitation are lies and that's why eventually, even those who "benefit" from them feel empty, unhappy, and sold out.

Let's stay at the last scene for a moment. The father has just declared "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 imagine that the older son isn't satisfied with this. And that he chooses to remain outside and that 10-15 minutes later he is joined by his grandmother and a household worker whose been around a long time. What Good News might those two have to offer this stammering older sibling? In a minute we are going to split up into small groups and envision what that conversation might look like.

But before going there, I want to take us to something important that Rob Bell addresses in chapter seven. It's a chapter entitled "The Good News is Better Than That." And Rob Bell's main point is that the story we tell ourselves about good and bad, about worthiness and disgrace, about what we deserve and what we don't deserve, the story we tell ourselves about who we are and what we inherit or what we miss out on as a result—Bell's main point is that those stories have a lot to do with how we understand God. And I think Bell is right on that. Absolutely right. Those stories do shed a ton of light on how WE understand God. But I don't

think they shed much light, at all, on how God understands us. If we want to shed light on how God understands us, perhaps we need look back to the story of the Prodigal Son.

When the younger son comes home, having wrecked his life and having squandered everything he inherited, the father (seeing him at a distance) runs out to greet him. When the older son self-exiles from the celebration and gets lost in resentment, the father comes out of the party to find him. Jesus is trying to tell us something about the love of God here. It is a love that comes out. That moves boldly towards its loved ones, no matter how badly they may be behaving. It is a love that meets us where we are at and doesn't let us go even when we've let ourselves go. It is a love that welcomes us home by first meeting us where we are, no matter where we are. Heads between our legs. Hearts hardened. No matter. It laces up its shoes or leaves the party if necessary...it does whatever it can to find us. So you may be a minority screw up like me, or the archetypal responsible one like the rest of the bible study participants on Thursday night, but either way: there's Good News for you.





