Luke 15:11-32

Everyone hasa favorite story. One of my favorite stories is the 1987 movie, *The Princess’ Bride*. If you’ve seen it, you might remember that in the opening scene there’s a boy who’s sick in bed and his grandfather comes to read him a book. Now, the boy is a little skeptical and asks, “Does it have any sports in it?” his grandfather responds, “It’s got fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles.” The boy shrugs his shoulders and says, “That doesn’t sound too bad, I’ll try and stay awake”.

The Princess Bride does have all of those things, but what makes it a great story is the characters. You’ve got Westly, the farm boy turned pirate. Buttercup, the farmgirl turned princess. Fezzik the loveable giant, Inigo Montoya the swordsman, Mad Max the disgraced miracle worker, and many more.

That’s how it is with most classic stories, they have great characters. This holds true for our parable just read in the Gospel reading. This is not just a classic story of the Bible, but of all of time, and so we’re going to take a look at these three characters; the younger brother, the older brother, and the father, and see what they might mean for our lives today. 1:20

**Younger Brother**

The story begins with the infamous younger brother. He’s been living on his father’s estate but has bigger dreams. He’s tired of being told what to do, how to act, how to dress, how to behave. He’s tired of working on the estate. all he wants to do is get out of town. Out on his own there is no one to tell him what to do but himself. But there’s a problem, where can he get the funds for this venture?

He hatches a plan. He goes to his father and demands his share of the inheritance. The son is making himself quite clear to his father: “I don’t care about you; I just care about your stuff.” Even stronger, “I wish you were dead so that I could get the inheritance already.” Today, the father might quietly cut his younger son a check but in that day the wealth was in land ownership. So, the father sells some of his land and gives him the money. Having all that he needs, the younger brother gets out of town.

Maybe you’ve felt like the younger brother before, I know I have.

I remember being in a similar stage of life my senior year of high school. Maybe some of you with teenagers know what I’m talking about. As I got to the end of high school, I loved my family, but I was ready to get out and forge my own path. I was ready to be my own boss, to do what I wanted, when I wanted. That was my picture of the good life: self-autonomy.

It’s so easy to get swept up in our own ideas of the good life. “If only I had this job…”, “If only my spouse or kids were more like this…”, “If only we lived here or there”, “If I could just achieve this thing, then I would be happy”.

Sometimes, like the younger brother asking for his inheritance, we enlist God in the project to achieve our good life, promising that we’ll do anything for him if he would just give us this one thing. And sometimes we just want God and his obligations to go away so that we can quietly pursue our own ends.

After high school I went to college, but I never found that good life. Maybe at times I thought that I had, but those times were always fleeting. And in my experience, these desperate attempts at freedom often end the same way; tired, worn out, and less satisfied than before. You wake up one day wondering how you got where you are, not the person you set out to be, not in the situation you set out to be in. You feel aimless, you feel adrift. The good life turned out to be a mirage. The younger brother dreamed of being the king of his own density but in the end could not even dine with the pigs. 4:07

**Older Brother**

Now,let’s take a look at the older brother. Steady, obedient, consistent, reliable, hard worker. The employer’s dream. One day, after another long day of work in the fields, he comes walking back up to the house. He takes a calloused hand and wipes the sweat and dirt from his brow, but then he freezes, and tilts his head. “Is that music coming from the house?” He calls to a servant who excitedly explains: It’s your brother, he’s come back! Your father’s throwing him a party, and he’s going all out! He even killed the fattened calf!”

But this is too much for the older brother. That’s not a party that the older brother wants to go to. The father gets wind of the situation and goes out to talk to him, but the older brother makes himself clear. He says to his father, “Look, all these years I’ve served you and you never gave me anything! And then this son of yours comes back and you do all this for him.” The father responds, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

Now, it’s important to remember here, the younger brother has spent his inheritance. Everything that the father owns, the house, the fields, the animals, will one day pass to the older brother. It’s all his. And that is precisely the problem with this great feast, with killing the fattened calf. The way the older brother sees it; the insolent younger brother is now cutting into his inheritance.

At the beginning of the story we saw that the younger brother doesn’t care for the father but only his stuff but now we see the same with the older brother. On the happiest day of his father’s life, he dishonors him by refusing to join the celebration because he does not feel honored or compensated for his service. While being bodily present with his father, his heart is adrift. 6:06

The attitude of the older brother is all too easy for us to fall into. It’s easy because it’s not usually a conscious decision. It begins as an honest desire to love God and serve our neighbor. We faithfully attend church, teach confirmation, do service projects, give money to the church, and stay away from the sins that others enjoy. But then something happens. We hit a rough stretch of life and almost without thinking we ask God, “Why is this happening to me, *after all that I’ve done for you*. I’m not perfect, but I’m trying really hard to do what you want, why did you let this happen to me?”. It is all too easy to adopt the attitude of the older brother: that God in some small way owes me for my faithfulness. 7:03

**Father**

There’s one more character here, the Father. The father is a remarkable character. His younger son comes to him and demands his inheritance. This is going to cost him financially and socially, but more than that, his son whom he loves does not love him back. This is a scar that will pain him every day that his son is gone. Miraculously, this scar doesn’t turn him bitter, angry, or resentful. Instead he just waits and watches. He keeps his eyes on the horizon, hoping to see his lost son.

Then, one day he sees his son trudging up the road to the house. In his joy, he hikes up his robes and runs to meet his son (something a respected patriarch would never do in the ancient world)! His son starts explaining how he is going to work to pay back what he lost, but his father is having nothing of it, he calls for the finest robe and the fattened calf. “Tell the whole town, we’re having a celebration!” This is amazing love, no explanation needed, welcome home!

But all is not well. While the feast is going on a servant informs him about his older son. Does the father storm outside and berate him for his cold heartedness toward his younger brother? No. He goes out, he reasons with him, and even after an angry outburst by his older son, he reminds him of their relationship, “We have been together this whole time, nothing has ever come between us, and one day, all of this will be yours. But it’s right to celebrate, for your brother who was dead is alive, who was lost is found”.

Fathers have mixed reviews in this world. Some are really good, and some are really bad. This can make it hard to think about God as our father. But this is an otherworldly kind of father, overflowing with love, patience, and forgiveness. A father that mourns the broken relationship with his children, a father that seeks after his estranged children, and a father that rejoices in reconciliation. 9:30

Like the younger and older son, we have alienated ourselves from God. We demand to be our own gods and chase our own ideas of the good life, or we try to use our goodness and obedience to leverage blessings from God. Either way we disdain the relationship that God would have with us.

But like the Father in the story, God runs out to us, he takes our rags that smell of swine and clothes us with the best robe in the house, the righteousness of Christ. In the parable, the older brother is angry at the extravagant feast because it comes out of his inheritance. But Jesus Christ, our older brother, willingly paid our debt of sin with his life, so that we might be welcomed back into the family. He received our sin; we receive his righteousness.

The last three weeks we’ve talked about being Adrift, and there’s no better story to show just how lost and adrift we are. But there’s also no better story to show just how dearly God our Father desires to have us back. It is because of his love, and his Son, that we who were once dead are alive, we were lost but now are found. Amen. 11:20

Swap intro story if you can

Clarity on transitions