

'Living an Alternative Lifestyle'
Luke 15:1-2; 11-32 (English Standard Version)
Irresistible – Can the World Live Without Us?
August 27, 2006

Let me invite you to open the Scriptures to the third book of the New Testament, the story of Jesus' life on earth told by a physician named Luke who gathered a bunch of information about Jesus from eyewitnesses and wrote it down to point a non-believing friend to Jesus. That's helpful to know as we jump into the fifteenth chapter of Luke's story because we walk into this story about a father and his two sons thinking about our relationship as a church, as families, as individuals to a world and people who are broken, lost and ruined. Our concern specifically in these six weeks together is to discover what about our life and message as Christians is irresistible to people who have little interest in religion and find what is passed off as Christianity in the South to be utterly repulsive.

Most of us have resigned ourselves to the idea that people out there don't want what goes on in here because there's something wrong with them. And that is true – if what we do here is a head-and-heart response to God's mercy to us in Jesus, then people who don't think they need mercy see little need to be here. And certainly the message of grace is offensive because we're all hard-wired to think that we're good enough for God, but the problem is that what offends the world around us is not Jesus, it's the people who claim to follow Jesus and the way we treat people who are different than us.

To understand what Jesus is saying to us we have to begin looking inside our own skin and asking ourselves what kind of people we cannot fathom – honestly – being loved by God. I don't mean the generic God-loves-everybody kind of love. I mean what individuals or groups of people cannot possibly be loved by God as much as he loves you. Truth is, we probably know better than to think in exactly those terms, so let me ask it this way, what types of people 'out there' do you read about or see around town or on the TV that cause you to react in disgust. The Mexican guy who you see over by Home Depot who doesn't speak any English and who's probably here illegally? Poor, un-educated white trash whose idea of high-brow is watching NASCAR in high-def and splurging to drink Budweiser instead of Old Milwaukee? People with a different sexual orientation or political affiliation –I mean, seriously, how could anyone with a brain have voted for George Bush, right? That turn of your stomach that I would even say that about a good man (a Christian man) speaks to this. Some of you feel like that dude from *The Matrix* who could barely stomach the foul stench of humanity as you're sitting here among Christians, who very well may be the most socially retarded, pea-brained, bigoted people on the planet. Or maybe it's the person sitting down the row from you who you simply don't jeehaw with.

I need you to set aside the Jesus mask you're wearing – you know, the one where you smile and play nice with everyone until you get in the car and start talking about what she was wearing or how rowdy their kids are – and when you get eyeball-to-eyeball with the reality of the way you see other people, then you'll be able to understand a big part of what's going on here in Luke 15.

Jesus hung out with people that most of us wouldn't hang out with – and by hang out I mean that he stayed in the homes of tax collectors and had dinner with drunks, thieves and whores. He didn't simply pop in and out of their lives, he considered them friends and they saw him in the same way. And lest we romanticize and

sanitize the world of Jesus, we need to understand that these were the most hardened, the most brazen, the most cruel, the most crass, the most outwardly vile men and women in the city. These were not the kind of people you invited over to have Thanksgiving dinner with Grandma.

One night Jesus is out with people known simply as 'sinners' and wouldn't you know, four or five religious guys sit down and like a group of teenage girls who think they're cool because Daddy's dumb enough to buy them an expensive car, these guys look over and in a voice loud enough to be heard, they say, "Look at this man. What kind of God-follower is friends with tax collectors and sinners." They roll their eyes and go back to their conversation, content to have shamed Jesus and his friends.

If you were sitting at the table with Jesus and his friends, you'd see that the words of these 'good men' had hit their target. It's not like they had to be reminded that they weren't exactly model citizens. You can feel this concoction of shame and rage begin to crash over them when Jesus starts into another one of his stories.

Actually he tells three stories – the first two are pretty simple stories about things that had been lost that were found by people who went to great lengths to bring them back. Jesus then jumps into this story that I want us to hear and talk about for a few minutes for this reason. And if you hear nothing else that I say all morning, you need to hear this: what Jesus is about to teach us in this story of a father and his two sons is that both self-discovery and moral conformity miss the point of life. We tend to think of life as a choice between religion and irreligion, good and bad, right and wrong but what Jesus is teaching sinners and saints in his day and ours is that our greatest need is a completely different way of life, an alternative between morality and religion on one hand and immorality and irreligion on the other hand.

There was a man who had two sons and the younger son shamed his father by asking for his part of the family inheritance on his 18th birthday. I say that the old man was shamed because in Jewish culture, a son didn't receive his inheritance until his father died, meaning that when the son made this request (most likely in public), he was telling everyone that his father was as good as dead to him and that all he wanted was his father's riches.

The expectation of good fathers was that such a request would be met with this punk kid being beaten, kicked out of the house and disowned. To shame one's own father was unheard of – no doubt Jesus' friends and the religious guys sitting at the table next to them trying hard not to listen to Jesus' story were all in agreement. Such a request should be punished severely.

So imagine just how offensive it was when Jesus, who had paused just a moment to add to the suspense of how the father would react, says simply, 'So the father divided his land between his two sons.' It's almost impossible for us to realize just how wrong it was for the story to go this way – this is like Rocky not getting off the canvas, the fairy tale not having the happy ending – and for an instant both the sinners and the saints were on the same team as they all sat there mortally offended by the actions of both this father and son.

The story seems to get better because this kid gets what he deserves and blows all of his money when he enters the World Championship of Poker, dates Paris Hilton and tries his hand in the music industry. His fifteen minutes of fame last about that

long and before you know it, he's broke – so broke that he has to sell everything off, and by everything I mean everything. The economy goes south, his record company goes bankrupt, his friends all leave him when the money runs out and the one-way bus ticket to nowhere takes him to the backwoods of his homeland where he becomes an unpaid volunteer working the one job he can find – cleaning up after pigs, which in Jewish culture was a job no one wanted because pigs were considered to be unclean animals, meaning that the person handling pigs was also unclean, a sinner, an outcast.

It's hard to watch someone's life go into a tailspin and it's amazing how long it takes some people to realize just how jacked-up their life is, but at some point in time, this guy figures out just how bad off he is and in a moment of utter despair, he comes up with a plan that includes him begging his own father – the man he had shamed and wished death upon – to take him back into his home, not as a son, not as a servant, not even as a slave, but as the slave of a slave, in the hopes that he might be able to become valuable enough to his father to make up for what he had done.

So he heads toward home, going over his speech in his mind and he's nervously walking through his hometown when he's mobbed by a man who tackles him to the ground, weeping. The young man thinks he's being attacked by someone who had recognized him but as he's about to start beating on his attacker, he recognizes the familiar voice and feel and smell of his father who is rolling around on the ground with him, sobbing what seems like tears of joy and asking over and over, 'Is it really you?'

People are starting to gather around and already aware that he's not exactly man of the year material, the young man gets to his feet and wanting to not make a scene, tries to pull his father off the main road and plead for forgiveness and offer himself as his servant for life. But the father has plans of his own and shouting to servants and everyone in town he orders shoes and clothes and the family ring to be brought for his son and he invites everyone to a party in his son's honor that will be big enough for the whole town.

Now for some reason, that's where most people end the story with this fairy tale ending of a sweet old man who loves his boy so much that he'll make a fool out of himself for him. If you had a good screenwriter and director and actors, you could probably put this on film and guarantee that people would at least tear up a bit. But no one sitting with Jesus is crying – they are at best confused and more likely, they are livid because this kind of behavior on the part of the father is absolutely intolerable. You just can't let the boy back in! There's no such thing as letting bygones be bygones! Don't you realize that this kid is just here to take advantage of the generosity of a man who apparently has lost his mind?

But the story's not over – it feels like it should be, but Jesus isn't done yet. Fast forward a few hours and the party is in full swing. Truth be told, no one really came for the son, they came because the father always through great parties, even if that day's episode in town with all the crying and kissing and carrying on had convinced some of them that the old man was losing it. It's near midnight when the man's other son – the older one – arrives at home after a long day out in the fields and he's met at the gate by one of the servants who noticing the look of confusion on his face tells him that the old man decided to throw a party for his brother who has just returned home after almost ruining the family.

'A party? A party? Are you kidding me? That...he comes home and he gets a party? I cannot believe this! You go find my father and tell him that I'm home and that I'm not coming to his...party.' The older brother ends up where he always ended up on nights like this when he'd be angry at his father for being so co-dependent with his brother, angry at the sheer stupidity of the people around him. Sitting on the wall surrounding the family complex on a hill overlooking land which used to be theirs until his father sold it and gave the money to...him. 'Son, what are you doing out here?' His father pats him on the back and sits next to him. 'Come on inside. I know your brother would love to see you.' 'Don't you understand – I don't have a brother. My brother died the moment he ruined this family. That son of yours who is wearing my clothes and my shoes and wearing my ring and eating my food and drinking my wine – I just don't get it. You have never even killed a scrawny little goat in my honor, you've never thrown a party for me – not even a small one for me and my friends. But this son of yours shows up – this same son who took everything you worked for and blew it on whores – and you serve steak and invite the entire town to a party...for him? No, Father, I will not go in and be happy because he's home.'

I don't think it's too difficult to get the *ethos* of this story – the story of not one lost son, but two. One son lost because he wandered away from the love of his father; the other son lost because he stayed and slaved for his father out of duty, not love. We never hear the impact this story had on the lives of the sinners sitting at Jesus' table (whose lives so closely resembled that of the younger brother), nor do we know if the religious Pharisees ever figured out that they're the older brother. I wonder how many of us find ourselves in the story of these two men whose lives looked very different but whom in the end are really not that different at all.

Tim Keller, who pastors at Redeemer Church in NYC, says that there seem to be three things that Jesus is trying to get across here – three ways of changing our thinking and the way we see all of life. Because again, there are two massive problems in this room this morning and they all have to do with how we think about life. Some of us are like the younger brother and think that life is about self-discovery, a world where we alone determine who we are and what we do and if anyone stands in our way, we walk through them or simply ignore them. Younger brothers see God and simply live like God is dead. And we get that because that's what church people talk about all the time – bad people doing bad things.

We struggle to define things as good or bad in the world in which we live in – by 'bad' I simply mean those thoughts, values, and actions that functionally ignore God. It's not that we're confessing atheists – we know there's a God – we just wish he'd leave us alone. So we wander off and blow through life until the gifts and resources that God has given us and we've hijacked for our own devices have backfired and brought us nothing but misery. You know the drill – pursue a goal, a dream, only to find that even the good things in life won't satisfy. So we push and push for more and more until life breaks and we break and we're left alone and confused, longing for home and a Father we feel like we've never known. With nowhere else to go we end up heading towards home, expecting to find a slavemaster and not a father. We expect punishment and not grace. We're ready to work, not to be lavished and loved and forgiven and free. And to the drunks and thieves and whores and people like you and me, Jesus intends to disintegrate our desire for 'badness' by showing us the goodness of a God whose love is so powerful that the very smallest of inclinations towards Him is a work of his grace and mercy. And what we find here, even after running away for the millionth time is a God who is constantly in pursuit of us and who treats us like we've never left home.

But notice that Jesus isn't just talking about bad people – the younger brother isn't even his main focus. What Jesus intends for us to hear in this room this morning is that both the younger brother and the older brother are lost – both have wandered away from the father – the younger brother leaves home and leaves the embrace of the father; the older brother stays home but stays outside while the father throws a feast. They're both lost because neither of them want the father, they merely want his stuff. Younger brothers want God dead and out of their lives so they can gain control and do what they want. But older brothers are a bit more subtle – rather than running away, they keep God close but still seek control not in their independence but through their obedience.

Here's where we need to see that Jesus not only redefines God for us, but he also redefines sin, as well. With all the different backgrounds and stories in this room, who knows how you see sin, but so often we define sin simply in terms of moral action, doing good. Sin is disobedience and as long as we do the right thing, we're free from sin. But notice that there is something seriously wrong with the obedient older brother. He is bitter and angry and lashes out at the father because he feels like a slave. There is only action, no adoration or admiration.

You can tell that the older brother has no clue whether the father loves him or not because in his mind, love is something you earn. Some of us know exactly how it feels when we've worked hard and feel like we deserve something because of our performance, only to watch it be handed to someone else. When I was in sixth grade, I was a shoo-in for captain of the crossing guard. I didn't get it and I pitched a fit. Ask my mom – it wasn't pretty. Why? Because I had earned that spot and I didn't get it. How many of us function like older brothers when good things happen to people we know aren't as good as we are – angry, bitter and wondering whether God even knows we exist, much less love us.

We get so caught up in our own morality that we miss how brutally judgmental we are towards younger brothers. If you want to find out if a church suffers from cultural older brother-ishness, look at whether or not the people are moving towards younger brother-types with the love of Jesus. We act like the older brother who's so chapped that his father has never thrown a party for him that he completely misses the fact that everything that his father owns is already his. And when you and I forget that because of Jesus we have everything that we need in this life, we live like older brothers and use people for our gain rather than giving our lives away for the good of others.

Have you ever hit a stretch in life where you want to scream out, "I don't deserve this," maybe if you were honest you'd look at your life and look at God and say, "I deserve more." Just like the older brother who accuses his father of never giving him anything even though he had everything that belonged to the father, we go through life acting like God owes us. And when bad things happen to us, we snap because we're good and we don't deserve bad.

What's going on here this morning is that Jesus is redefining life for us – God is not some recalcitrant tyrant whose love we must earn; sin is not merely doing bad but doing the right things for the wrong reasons; which means that we are not merely saved from our badness but our goodness, as well. We need to understand that both younger brothers and older brothers miss the point of life – both self-discovery and moral conformity miss the fact that we were made for God and that both our

morality and immorality have ruined and broken everything. We have brought shame to our Father, we have broken his heart and broken fellowship with him because what we've really wanted in life isn't God, just his stuff.

What we need to see this morning is that salvation isn't about freeing yourself from the shackles of religion so you can find yourself. Salvation isn't about being a good person. Salvation is a life of repentance – a life that sees that our lives have brought shame to God, that begins to comprehend what we deserve for causing his shame and experiences sorrow and grief because we miss our Father.

I'm not sure how you'd define Christianity, but here's how Jesus defines it here in Luke 15 – Christianity is neither moral conformity or self-discovery; it's not a religion and it's not freedom from religion. Christianity is not about morality, Christianity is repentance, a life of returning home to God. Repentance isn't something we drum up – repentance is a response to the proactive love of God who 'kisses before we confess' and who 'seeks out angry older brothers who have everything but think they have nothing.'

The fact that God moves towards us first might not seem obvious from the story – yes, the Father runs towards the younger brother and yes, he kisses and embraces and welcomes him home before he can repent and confess, but the younger brother seems to have made the first move right? So how can we say with confidence that God moves towards us first, that we repent because he has forgiven, not the other way around?

Notice how this story ends. Angry older brother lashes out at the father for never giving him anything and in 15:31 the father says, 'everything that is mine is yours,' you have everything you could possibly ever need. So come into the party and celebrate with us. And then that's it – we never know how the older brother responds which seems odd until we remember that Jesus is talking to older brothers, he's telling these Pharisees something about themselves and something about him.

Don't miss what the father is saying to the older brother when he reminds him that everything that the father owns belongs to the older brother. Remember that at the beginning of the story, the father liquidated his assets and gave everything to his two sons. And when the younger brother lost everything as we've lost everything, the cultural expectation is that to bring honor to the father, the older brother would go out and spare no expense to bring home his younger brother. But the older brother hadn't gone out to rescue his brother and Jesus' point is that the older brothers in the room – the Pharisees, the religious folk, people like many of us in this room – have failed in our role as agents of redemption and renewal. We have been far too self-consumed to even notice that everything that belongs to God belongs to us and that no expense is to be spared in rescuing our younger brothers.

But even more than that, Jesus reminds each of us in this room that as younger brothers who have wandered away from God and sought home where there is no home only to lose everything that belonged to our Father, we have an older brother who left heaven to come to earth and spared no expense, not even his own life, to rescue us and bring us home.