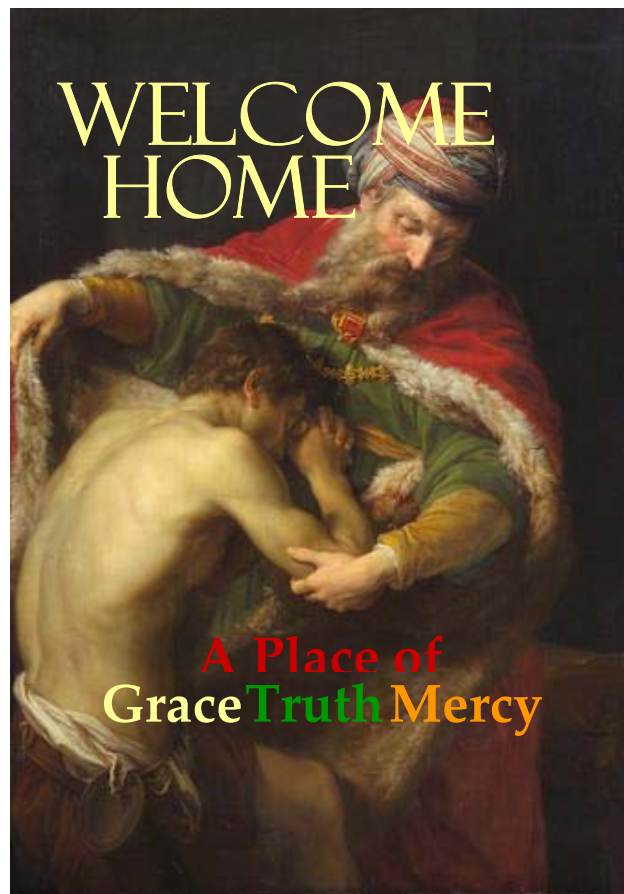


The Covenant Pulpit



"My Brother's Keeper"

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If you ever go to the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, you might meet Daniel. He used to be a champion weightlifter and body builder. The only thing that's bigger than Daniel's biceps is his heart. But it wasn't always that way.

For years Daniel worked long hours as a personal trainer, driven by a dream that he would one day own his own gym. After he got together enough money for a down payment, the bank agreed to finance the purchase *if* he could get someone to cosign the note. His brother agreed to do it.

They filled out all the applications and then waited for the approval. After several tense days, the bank called Daniel and told him that the loan had gone through and the check was ready. As soon as he got off work, he joyfully rushed across town to pick up his money.

The loan officer was embarrassed. He said to Daniel, "Your brother was in earlier today. He picked up the money and used it to pay off the mortgage on his house." Daniel was livid that his own brother would betray him like that and stormed over to his house with murderous intent. His brother answered the door with his baby daughter in his arms, confident that Daniel wouldn't hit him while he was holding a child.

Daniel didn't hit him. But he did promise that if he ever saw his brother again he would break his neck. His dreams shattered and his heart ravaged, he worked long hours in other people's gyms to pay off the bank debt.

Along the way, Daniel and his wife became born again Christians. But he still found it impossible to forgive his brother. He went years without seeing him, unable bring himself to look at the face of the one who had stolen his dreams. And his brother liked his own face too much to let Daniel see it! But God had other plans. One day, they bumped into each other on a busy street corner. Listen to what Daniel says about that encounter:

"I saw him, but he didn't see me. I felt my fists clench and my face got hot. My initial impulse was to grab him around the throat and choke the life out of him.

But, as I looked into his face, my anger began to melt. As I saw him, I saw the image of my father. I saw my father's eyes. I saw my father's look. I saw my father's expression. And, as I saw my father in his face, my enemy once again became my brother."

Daniel walked toward him. His brother started to run, but he was too slow. Daniel grabbed his shoulder in a vice grip. The brother grimaced,

expecting the worst. But, instead of his throat being squeezed by his brother's hands, he found himself being pulled into Daniel's embrace. The two brothers stood locked in a bear hug, sobbing uncontrollably as thousands of gawking people passed by.

Daniel's words bear repeating: "When I saw the image of my father in his face, my enemy became my brother."

In the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, the older brother is angry that his younger brother has run off to the "far country" and shamed the family name with his wild living. He is outraged that he is welcomed back into his father's good graces. Even more outrageous is the fact that the old man is throwing a welcome home party for this derelict delinquent! The older brother snarls at his dad in verse 30, "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him." Let the awful weight of those words sink in: "...this son of yours..." His father responds in verse 32, "But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive..." Let these words sink in too: "...this brother of yours..." If we have the same father, we *are* brothers and sisters. This is the fourth and final principle from this parable:

**When we see our Father's face in them,
all people become our brothers and sisters.**

Billions of strangers live and die in faraway places we will never visit. They come in different colors, speak unintelligible languages, worship different gods, and have values that are alien (and even distasteful) to us. But if you could look closely at their faces, you just might see the image of your *heavenly* Father in them. Doesn't that make them your brothers and sisters?

There are others who live closer to home. You don't know most of them. But there are those who sit behind you in Biology 101, run on the treadmill next to you at the YMCA, work in your office, or sit in the next pew at church. You know them enough to smile and exchange some pleasantries. But if you stopped and took a closer look, you might see your Father's image in their faces. Does that make them your brothers and sisters?

Then there are those who have wounded you. A parent abused you. A spouse abandoned you. The friend who owes you money just drove by in a new car. The children you raised with such high hopes have broken your heart. The older you get the more you feel like a stranger in your own country as morals decline, values disintegrate, and politicians disappoint. But if you could look past your pain, would you see the image of your *heavenly* Father in the face of those who hurt you? Does that make them

your brothers and sisters too? Again, Daniel's words echo back: "When I saw the image of my father in his face, my enemy became my brother."

Sometimes I wish I could say to God, "...this son *of yours*..." Then I could wash my hands of lost sons and daughters in far away countries, ignore neighbors in my gated community, not have to put up with irritating relatives, or pray for Hollywood celebrities who offend my sense of decency, or forgive someone who broke my heart. I could walk by people in distress and pretend I didn't see. Or hear about missionaries who need my support, and rationalize that financial times are too tough to respond in faith. But my *heavenly* Father won't allow that. He says, "...this brother *of yours*..." When we see our Father's face in them, all people become our brothers and sisters. As we wrap up this parable, Jesus wants us to consider these things:

**1. If we search for lost sheep and coins,
why not younger brothers and sisters?**

Let's again remember what sparked this parable. In verses 1&2 we read,

"Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

The religious elites are angry that Jesus is hanging out with moral degenerates who are recklessly squandering their lives in the *far country*. Behind their complaint is this logic: "These tax collectors and prostitutes are so sinful that they couldn't possibly be children of a holy God. If they aren't God's sons and daughters, they aren't our brothers and sisters. So we can wash our hands of them." Pharisees and teachers of the Torah wall these "sinners" off from decent folk. They won't welcome them into their synagogues, eat with them, talk to them, or even touch them. Yet this rabbi from Galilee greets these "sinners" like long-lost brothers and sisters at a family reunion. He laughs with them, shares their meals, touches their diseased bodies, and even embraces them. Like the older brother in the parable that's to follow, these sanctimonious snobs ask, "What kind of religion is this that lets sinners come home from the 'far country' to a 'welcome home' party without first doing penance to prove themselves?"

Jesus turns on these religious elite and challenges their flawed assumptions with three rapid-fire parables: "My Father is like a shepherd who leaves his flock to go into the wilderness looking for a single wayward sheep. When he finds that lost sheep, he joyfully carries him home." "My father is like a

woman who frantically scours her house until she finds a single lost coin, and then joyfully clasps it to her chest like a precious treasure.”

But I realized this past week that the third parable destroys the symmetry of the first two. In the third story the Father *doesn't* go into the “far country” to find his lost son and bring him home. Unlike the shepherd and woman, he stays put. He’s the *waiting* father, not the *searching* father. Why does Jesus change everything in the third parable? Maybe, if we can solve that mystery, we will discover the key that unlocks the greatest secret in this story.

As I wrestled with this question, I remembered that Jesus was mostly addressing these parables to those teachers of the Torah. He ends by telling a story about two brothers because the books of the Old Testament hang on multiple stories of two brothers: Cain and Abel; Ishmael and Isaac; Esau and Jacob; and Manasseh and Ephraim. These teachers of the Torah would know all those *brother* stories. As I began to look at these Old Testament *brother* stories, I found the key to this parable in the first one.

Cain, the oldest son of Adam and Eve, got so violently angry with his younger brother, Abel, that he killed him. Our heavenly Father called out to Cain in Genesis 4:9, “Where is your brother Abel?” And Cain replied in those infamous words, “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” In other words, “Am I the one responsible to find my brother?” But God says in verse 10, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” And across our planet the blood and tears of lost and dying people cry out while we respond, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” If we can pretend that they aren’t, then maybe we can rationalize that their blood isn’t on our hands when they go from “far countries” into a lost eternity.

Do you see why no one searches for the lost one in this parable? The older brother should have gone, but he refused to do it. He said something far worse than Cain’s callous, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He said, “He’s not even my brother. And, if he’s not my brother, then I am not responsible to go find him.” But Jesus is teaching in this parable what was taught from the beginning to Cain: we are responsible for what happens to our brothers and sisters. It is not the father, but we who must go into the “far country” searching for the lost and bringing them home.

2. The moral imperative for older brothers to go to the *far country*

Searching for the lost, whether in the *far country* close to home or in some distant country on the other side of the world, is not optional. If they are our brothers and sisters, it is a moral imperative. There are three reasons why the older brother has to leave home and go to the *far country*:

1) Responsibility for lost brothers and sisters

We Christians usually apply those terms “brother” and “sister” to those who are in the Father’s house with us. But if they bear any image of our heavenly Father, all people are our brothers and sisters. Every person on this earth is descended from Adam and Eve, and all part of the same human family tree. The only difference is, some brothers and sisters are “found” and others are still “lost” and in a place far from the Father’s house. Some have been chosen by the Father to come home. Others will never come home. But we don’t know who they are. So we love everyone, reach out to everyone, pray for everyone, and share our lives with everyone who is willing and our message of salvation through Christ with everyone who will listen. We can never dismiss anyone with the words “...this son of yours...” Instead we must ask the Holy Spirit to seal verse 32 in our hearts: that every lost son and daughter of our Father is *our* brother and sister.

2) Love for the Father

This older brother hears his father’s weeping in the night. He sees him go to the gate every day, looking down the road for his lost boy. He watches him pick at his food every evening, unable to eat because of his grief. If he loved his father, wouldn’t he have left the house and gone to the *far country* to plead with his brother, “Please come home. Our dad’s heart is breaking for you. And so is mine. But most of all, I can’t stand to see our father in so much pain.”? But his father’s anguish doesn’t move him. And his father’s joy at his lost son’s return only makes him angry. Luke 15:10 says that the angels in heaven “rejoice over one sinner who repents.” But Pharisees and older brothers seldom do.

Look at his angry complaint *against* his father in verses 29&30: he’s stayed at home, done all the work, and kept all the rules, but his father never threw him a party. Now this lost son who squandered his inheritance on whores gets a welcome home party. It’s monstrously unfair. For most religious folks, it’s all about working hard to keep the rules. They have a hard time with grace. That’s why they are usually so graceless and unattractive to sinners. It wouldn’t do any good to throw them a party anyway, because they are so wound tight that they don’t know how to enjoy themselves. Most of all, they don’t really love the heavenly Father they claim to represent. That’s why sinners avoid their churches like the plague.

3) Resources given by our Father

The older brother should have searched the *far country*, not only because of his responsibility for his brother and the love for his father, but because he had the necessary resources. Go back to verse twelve. The father divided his property between both sons. According to Levitical Law the younger brother got one-third and the older brother got the remaining two-thirds of the estate. This father has given everything away. He has nothing left. That means if the younger brother squanders away his portion of the estate on wild living, all that's left is in the hands of the older brother. He has the resources necessary to go on a long trip, and find his brother, and bring him home. He has the robe to cover his rags, the ring to put on his finger, sandals to put on his feet, and a fattened calf for a welcome home feast. When the father gives his returning son all those things, he is really giving away the property of the older brother. (Could that be what's really behind the older brother's anger?) And sometimes we forget that all of our material blessings have been given to us by our father. We begin to think that his house is now *our* house to do with as we like. We think that the money he gave us is ours to hoard. When he asks for some of it so that missionaries can go into far countries, or the deacons can help the unfortunate, or in tithes and offerings so that there will be spiritual feast in his house for all of those who are coming home, we even think, like the older brother, that we have a right to hold on to it. After all, times are tough financially. In the words of verse 30, why would we squander our inheritance on those brothers who have squandered theirs on immorality in the *far country*?

Are there any older brothers who care enough to go to the *far country* on behalf of the Father; who will go because they feel responsible for lost brothers; who will give away everything if necessary to bring them home? Certainly those Pharisees and teachers of the law won't. Nor will the older brother in this parable. Are there any brothers in this world who will? This is the drama of this parable. Jesus drives us to ache for such a brother.

3. There is a Third Brother

You don't see him in this parable. He is the one telling the story; the one the Pharisees and teachers of the law are complaining about; the one who welcomes and eats with sinners. He is the oldest brother; the Only *Begotten* Son of the Heavenly Father; a brother older than time itself. He is the Older Brother of all the lost sons and daughters of God. He was in the Father's house. In the words of verse 31, he was always with the Father. Everything the Father had is his. He can say in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven

and earth has been given to me.” But he didn’t stay in heaven. He saw his Father’s anguish for lost sons and daughters in the “far countries” of this world. And, out of love for his Father and his lost brothers and sisters, he laid aside his glory and left his Father’s House for the far country. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” He lived in the far country, identified with lost brothers, and cared about their prostitutes and pig farmers. He pulled lost sons out of the mud of the pig pen and brought them home to his Father. His pure righteousness was the robe that covered their shame. He washed their dirty feet and put sandals on their worn out souls. When they protested that they had sinned against heaven and were unworthy to be called sons and daughters of God, he wrapped himself around them like a signet ring and declared that they were fully restored children of God. He was the fattened calf, or should I say “sacrificial lamb,” that was slain to pay off their debt to the Father.

And so the three stories come together at last: Jesus is the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep. Jesus is the woman who will not rest until the lost coin is found. And Jesus is the third brother who goes looking for two lost sons. He looks at the tax collectors and prostitutes –the younger brothers and sisters who live in the *far country*—and says, “I’ve come searching for you.” He looks at the Pharisees and teachers of the law—the older brothers who have never left the *Father’s House*—and says, “I’ve come out here to search for you, too and plead for you to come join the party.”

4. Now you have to write the rest of the story.

Jesus ends his story abruptly. The Father is pleading with the older brother in verse 32 to come to his senses; to see how unreasonable it is to begrudge his grace; to see how wonderful it is for lost sons to be found and dead brothers to come back alive; to become his brother’s keeper; to come in and join the feast of grace that is taking place in the house. And then the parable ends. We never know whether the older brother came in. We aren’t told how the Pharisees and teachers of the law responded. There is a reason for this. We are the older brothers and sisters who live in the Father’s house. We have to write our own ending to the story. Will we see our Father’s face in others and claim all people as our brothers and sisters? Will we be our brother’s keepers? Will we go and find those who are lost, no matter what it costs us? The story is yours to finish.