

I had a little brother and I brought him to my mother
And I said, "I want another little brother for a change."
She said, "Don't be a bother," so I took him to my father
And I said, "This little bother of a brother's very strange."
He said, "One little brother is exactly like another
And every little brother misbehaves a bit," he said.
So I took my little brother from my mother to my father
And I put the little bother of a brother back to bed.
(Poem I memorized in the fourth grade)

In the fourth grade, we had to memorize poetry and I fell in love with this poem (I had a little brother; what can I tell you). I'm kind of surprised that I still know most of it, although I have no idea who actually wrote it. But really, it could be a sort-of prodigal son story with a twist – referring to an unwanted, pain in the-you-know-what little brother. Read a familiar Bible story and sometimes you need to prepare for the unexpected in order to read it with fresh eyes.

There was a Sunday school teacher who was reading the story of the prodigal son to his class, clearly emphasizing the resentment of the older brother expressed at the return of his brother. When he was finished telling the story, he asked the class, "Now who was really sad that the prodigal son had come home?" At this point, the teacher is waiting for one of the children to say, "the older brother, of course." After a few minutes of silence, one little boy raised his hand and confidently stated, "The fatted calf." (sermons.com) When At all times, be prepared for the unexpected.

"Drop dead, Dad." It sounds a bit harsh, but it's realistically what the younger son was requesting. "Drop dead, Dad, because I want my part of the inheritance and I want it RIGHT NOW!" Wow. You'd think that he was talking to a genie that had just appeared from a lamp he was holding in his hands. "This is what I wish. I wish to have money. I wish to travel. And, I wish to be my own boss." That's all? Not only is he asking for his share of the money at the wrong time, he is speaking first to his father. Normally, in that culture as the youngest son, he would wait until his father spoke to him. The story should just end right there with the father stomping out the son's unexpected request. "Shame on you! Go to your room and there will be no dessert for you tonight!" It should have ended there, but it does not. The son gets his three wishes.

What goes through the mind of a young one on their way to an adventure? Isn't that what the younger son is doing? Is he at all concerned about the mindset of his father, of what he just asked his father to do for him? What about leaving a detailed itinerary of where he plans to go? Or maybe he could keep a log of his spending and e-mail it back to his parents or give them daily Facebook updates. But no, he's probably not concerned about his father, he just thinks about leaving and getting his father to foot the bill with his very life's worth.

For those of you who know the story, it may no longer seem surprising. It doesn't sound shocking because as you hear the request that the younger son makes, you can already see the table being set for the celebration upon his return. The fattened calf is being prepared as the older son purposely stays away from the celebration preparations. Maybe the story of the prodigal son has been reduced to a mere fable with a moral lesson instead of a reminder of God's unexpected and surprising grace that reaches out to all of us. Maybe it is too easy to listen to the story over and over again, focusing on the reactions of the older brother instead of reactions of the father, as the finder, with arms open wide, willing to accept the unacceptable.

When my younger brother was little, he used to go outside and play. One day, he came back inside and he was quite upset. We finally went out to see what had gone wrong. We lived next door to the church building that was used for Sunday school and fellowship events. And, as it so happened, one of the windows was broken. Of course my parents asked my little brother Jesse what had happened, knowing that he had probably been throwing ball up against the wall, missed, and broke the window instead. But that is not at all what my brother told them. Oh, he knew the window was broken, but it wasn't him. He said, "Peter Johnson did it." Yes, he had an imaginary friend who had a first name and a last name. It was Peter Johnson. (Side note: It was a bit strange because that was the name of our great grandfather that had died before we were born.) Sometimes the obvious solutions just seem too obvious and we think that there has to be some other way to explain things.

The older brother thought he knew what the obvious solution was and could not comprehend what was happening – it was as if his father had the "Peter Johnson did it syndrome" and needed to get back in touch with reality. We are much like the older brother who would prefer a bit more justice/punishment for his brother – the obvious solution -- as opposed to the forgiveness and mercy offered to him by the father. We, like the older brother, have worked for what we have and it's unfair that everyone else should not have to do the same. We have earned God's favor (or so we think) by "staying at home." We have merited his acceptance by the good lives that we lead. . . So how dare the father receive and accept this sinful brother so easily who has returned home saying he's sorry (image – C Lee Griess). You see, it is much easier to think about ourselves and pout over the unfairness that we see, like the older brother, than to be in awe of the celebration being prepared by a father who runs to his returning son with open arms of undeserved love and grace.

What was the younger son thinking? The money is gone. He finds himself taking care of pigs and is ready to eat the pigs' food. He realizes that it can't get any worse, but then it does. His only hope is to go crawling back to his father and beg to be a servant. So, he practices his speech, he plans it all out so that he can earn his way back into his father's home and hopefully his heart.

His plan fails miserably. He couldn't even get out half of his speech because his father interrupts him and hugs him! He orders a robe, a ring, sandals and a celebration party. The father accepts him back fully as his son and not as a servant. He restores him to his place in the

family and won't even let him try and earn his way back in – despite all that the son has done to him and the family – he gives it all to him.

And yet, the father has another son, the older son, who wasn't asked if he wanted to welcome back his brother. And yet the father goes to him, for he wants his older son to be a part of the celebration as well because he loves all of his children. And yet, when we leave the story, we don't know if the older son enters the celebration or not – we hope. . .

The father is there for his children. And the party takes place wherever and whenever God finds another prodigal child who is given a seemingly undeserved grace without doing anything to earn it.

You too are invited to the celebration. Do you stand around the corner with the older brother complaining about the great gifts given to the undeserved? Or do you join the celebration knowing that you, too, may be undeserving, but still are given the gifts of grace, love and forgiveness from a father who loves his children so much that he will run to them with open arms?