

Faith Mennonite Church
March 10, 2013-Lent 4
Ashamed no more
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From shame to life

Psalm 32, Luke 15:1-3a,11b-32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Older brother

I really hate irresponsibility. My father always taught us to be responsible and I followed his word as closely as possible. And I have a lot to show for it: my portion of the land is very productive. In fact, since I took over the management from my father, I've doubled the harvest. I work hard and I see the reward of my work.

And then there's my brother—the clown. We couldn't be more different. He's always been the life of the party, but he doesn't know diddly squat about work. He wanted to see the world, he always said, not this same old patch of earth. I would have been happy to have him take his leave, if only he hadn't done the unthinkable.

I couldn't believe he had the audacity to ask for his inheritance before he'd done anything to earn it. And to give it, my father needed to sell off half of our land. So, of course, *everyone* finds out what's going on. Now I'm not only embarrassed for my clown of a brother, but I have the added shame of a weak father who can't stand up to his loser son. Whenever I see the new owner of *our* land, I boil inside. I can't even go into the village or to the synagogue anymore because I always overhear some story about my brother that's made its way back. And let me tell you, they're never pretty. He has brought so much shame on our family. He's ruined my life.

Younger brother

How did I end up here? This wasn't what I had in mind when I told my father I wanted to see the world. The world of our farm always seemed so small. More than anything I think I wanted to get away from my brother. I always thought my parents favored him because he couldn't do *anything* wrong: he never messed around, never got in trouble...work, work, work...that's all he did. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't be like him—not that I really wanted to. I couldn't imagine life trying to please both my father and my brother.

But the only way to get away from my brother was to kill my father. I mean, that's basically what I did: I told him I wanted my inheritance now. That was as much as saying: I'm ready for you to die.

I was a little surprised that he didn't try to talk me out of it. I guess he knew that talk didn't work with me. I always have to learn the hard way by trying to do things my way. I always said, "Nothing's worth doing, if you can't have fun in the process."

I suppose I appeared shameless to everyone else, but deep down I was driven by shame...ashamed I wasn't as good as my brother....ashamed I couldn't fulfill the expectations of my family.

Running away only covered things for a while. Parties and drinking, buying friendship, masked the pain for a while, but then the money was gone and the pain was still there. And now here I am living in a pig sty—the very lowest that a good Jewish boy can sink. I'm so hungry, this pig slop is starting to look good. My father's hired hands are eating better than this.

Wait! That's it. I can't ask to be taken back into the family because I've caused too much harm. And there's no way my brother would want me anywhere around. But I can offer to be a slave...they don't have to pay me, only give me something to eat. I'll sleep in the shed. I'll stay out of my brother's sight and do the jobs he hates. But I have to get something to eat.

I'll tell my father how sorry I am....that I realize how selfish and sinful I was—I am...that I know I'm no longer part of the family, but please just let me be a slave.... Yes, that's what I'll do. I just hope I can make it back home before I collapse from hunger...

Father

It's not easy being a father to two sons who are as different from each other as mine are. One's a straight arrow; the other is a shooting star! But I love them both. In their own ways they've both brought me joy...and such deep pain. My older son has always had such a deep sense of justice and fairness. He's accomplished so much...made our land produce in ways I never imagined. But he can be so judgmental and it often seems that he's more interested in being right than being in relationship.

Ever since his brother left, he's kept me at a distance. When I suggest we do things together, he always has an excuse: he's too busy... he has an important project to finish. My wife tells me that when I'm away, he'll come to the house and eat with her, but if I'm here, he stays in his own quarters and has one of the servants bring his food.

And then there's my shooting star. I think he giggled before he cried. He brought so much happiness to our house with his smiles, his easy manner, his curious way of seeing the world. And he brought so many friends to our table. It could get a little rowdy sometimes, but his mother and I liked that his friends liked being with us. They made us feel young.

As he got older the happiness started colliding with expectations. He was never satisfied to do things the way his brother or I did them. I'm not sure his ways were any worse, but they sure drove his brother crazy. And it became clear fairly soon that the little world of our farm—even though we were fairly prosperous—wasn't going to be large enough for him. He had dreams and ideas that outgrew this place before it was time for us to be arranging his marriage. And frankly, no families were sending hints that they thought he'd be a good match for their daughters. His mother worried a lot.

Before I could think about a solution he came up with one: he asked me for his inheritance. His mother—well the whole village, really—thought I was totally mad when I complied.

But you see, I realized that one of us was going to die: staying here would only stifle his dreams and crush his spirit. Did I want to do that to my son? I chose to die: to my dreams for a perfect family, to my status in the village, to some of my material comfort, and to control over my son's future. I decided to let it all go with no guarantee of what would happen.

Strangely, as all of those things died, the love grew. I loved both of my sons so much. And when my older son wouldn't return the love, even though he was right here, my heart just swelled for the one I couldn't see. I prayed, I hoped, I longed, and I watched, watched the road every day just in case he might just return.

And then one day I saw his silhouette on the horizon! I could hardly breathe as I saw him coming down the lane. He was so disheveled...so thin. His face was hollow, but his eyes still had their brilliance. He started some gibberish about being sorry...having sinned...wanting to be my servant, but I just picked him up and held him in my arms. He came back, he came home, and I wanted to tell the whole world! My son, my lost son, my dead son, is alive!

The love I have for him is the same no matter what he's done or where he's been, because he's my son. Plain and simple. And it's the very same love that I have for my other son, and for all of my children, for you....and you...and you...I just want you to come home.

Please, come home.