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4 Lent C  
St Anne's Church, Annapolis, MD  
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*A Father, Two Sons, and a Community*

In a study entitled, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*, Frank J. Sulloway, a historian of science, set out to find what accounts for the sometimes great differences between siblings even though they share much of the same genetic material and are raised by the same parents. Why do two siblings with so much in common, sometimes set off on very different paths? Sulloway's studies suggest that birth order plays a huge role in how we develop. Each child, he says, must develop their own strategies for cornering parental resources. First borns are bigger than their younger siblings and, at least for awhile, are stronger and smarter. To overcome the disadvantage of a later start, younger children have to develop some strategy not based on brute strength. Younger siblings are generally better at coaxing and flattering, they develop skills not already staked out by older siblings, and they more risks. First borns tend to be more concerned with achievement, more ambitious, assertive, conventional, deferential to authority, dominating, identified with parents, and self-confident. They tend to be less empathetic, less willing to identify with the underdog, less rebellious, and less willing to take risks. It may be no surprise then, that there are a lot of firstborns among American presidents, British Prime Ministers, and – not covered in Sulloway's study – Episcopal clergy. There are a lot of younger siblings amongst revolutionaries. First borns play golf and run cross country. Younger siblings sky dive and drive race cars.

So it may be that in today's parable, we're merely observing the working out of an age-old human family dynamic: the older, more responsible brother stays at home, maybe not happily, but because it is the right, responsible, respectable thing to do, while the younger brother gets tired of a life in which he will always be the younger brother, living in the

shadow of the responsible one, and decides to risk it all and go off on his own.

Except that there's more to it than that. Because although we may see this as primarily a story about a father and two sons, in Jesus' time, this is primarily a story about community. It's a story about a father who is so extravagant and reckless in his love for both of his sons that he will pour out everything he has to reconcile them, not just to himself, but to the community of which they are a part.

The community in which this family lives is probably an agrarian community in which a great deal of how one lives and survives is based on the cohesiveness of the community. When you need something, like fields plowed or harvest gathered or barn raised, you turn to the community. You might trade one of your goats for a dozen chickens or some of your grain for some eggs. You send your boys to help the family down the road when your neighbors need some help and you know you can count on them for the same. In some ways the whole community is an extended family – you depend on one another and you know everyone else's business.

So it comes as quite a shock when a father who has two sons is told that the younger son wants his share of the inheritance now. As in, I want what will be mine when you're dead, now. As in, I cannot wait for you to die. And the father actually gives it to him. That raised some eyebrows. The Talmud says, "Our rabbis taught, three cry and are not answered. He who has money and lends it without witnesses; he who acquires a master; he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime."<sup>1</sup> Foolish man.

But that's what the father does. He divides his property between his two sons. And in a world where survival and success depend on being interdependent, the younger son wants to go it alone. He liquidates his inheritance and goes off, leaving his father and elder brother at home. Where there had been two sons to help with the farm, now there is one. When the father grows old there will be only part of a farm, only one son to support him. When the neighbors ask for help, there is less to give. It's an insult to the way the whole community lives – what the younger son did. It's a shame.

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<sup>1</sup> The comparative material from the Talmud and the insight about the *ketzezah* (below) come from a sermon I heard by Barbara Brown Taylor at the Festival of Homiletics about 3 years ago. I believe Taylor cited Kenneth Bailey as the source of her information.

Most of the news about the younger son comes back by rumor. Someone may have seen him here or there, but, it gradually gets harder to recognize him. He gets dirtier, less concerned with his appearance, lost weight – but if you push your way into a party, you would eventually find him at the center. It was bad enough that this is where the family inheritance was going, but what’s worse is he loses the last of his share of the family property amongst gentiles -- gentile pig farmers.

What the younger son has done is so bad, there is a ceremony to deal with it. It’s called a *ketzetzah*, which literally means “a cutting off.” When a man loses his field to a Gentile, the whole community gathers around the offender, because the whole community is shamed through this loss. The community gathers, brings jars or pots and breaks them open and says, “He is cut off from his inheritance.”

When the money runs out, the son comes to his senses. Doesn’t take him long to become nostalgic for home when the caliber of parties plummets. With fewer people calling themselves friends around. When he starts drinking by himself mostly. When he’s feeding pigs and actually considering competing with them for food. It all floods back: father, home, food. Or maybe not in that order: maybe food, shelter, father. He knows he can’t be a son anymore – he has treated his father as if he were dead, after all. But he knows his father’s servants eat well. Maybe, maybe, he would take me back as a servant, he thinks.

But someone has tipped the father off that the son is on his way home and the father does the most extraordinary thing – he runs to meet him. Fathers do not run. Children run. Women run. Aristotle says, “Great men never run.” And yet here he is, losing the last shreds of honor he has, running to meet his son. He runs! Happy to enfold his lost son in his arms and welcome him home—yes. But he also wants to get to his son before the rest of the community does. He needs to get to his son and throw him a party before the community gets to him and throws a *ketzetzah*. The father knows how his son will be treated when he returns to the community he has rejected. And so the father acts fast. He welcomes the son and before the son can tell his father his plan to work off his debt as a servant and pull his own weight, he reinstates him as a son. Despite his son’s plans, there is no way he can earn back what he has squandered. The debt he has created, to his father, to the community, is too big for him to pay it off. There is no way

he can make it up to the father. The only thing the son can do is accept his father's extravagant love, the pure gift of being loved. The father orders the servants to kill the fatted calf – not a goat, not some chickens, this is not a private intimate homecoming. This is a party for all the neighbors. The father kills the fatted calf and invites everyone in to celebrate the reconciliation of the son before the neighbors can break the jar and cut him off.

And before everyone can realize how brilliant the father has been, in pre-empting exclusion and punishment by inclusion and celebration, there's a big party going on and everyone's inside at the party. Well, almost everyone.

The elder son is not inside, and once again, the patriarch acts in a most un-patriarchal manner, excuses himself from the table and goes off into the darkness to plead with the firstborn. The older son says, "All these years I have slaved for you, but you have never thrown me a party." And the father says to him, "Everything that is mine is yours. Including that fatted calf. I gave it all to you a long time ago now. Any time you want you can celebrate. You can throw a party every night if you want. Your brother was dead, and is alive. What about you?"

There are those who understand the older brother. He wants his father to love him as he deserves to be loved, because he worked hard. He did the right thing. He wants the father to love him because. Because of something he's done. Just to love him for himself, he can't accept.

The father refuses to love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them. He just loves them.

This is a story about reckless love, reconciliation, about not needing to corner parental resources. About valuing reconciliation with the community above personal honor. This is a story about a father who wastes things, like chances, handing out second and third chances right and left. The only one who never stands a chance in the whole story is the fatted calf.

The story ends out there in the dark. With the music playing, the sweet smell of roasting meat wafting out on the evening breeze. The invitation to come into the party just hangs there, still extended. The end of the story is left open because Jesus wants to leave it up to us: come in and

join the party? Or stand outside in the dark? Reject the father's love or let our lives be the celebrations they're meant to be?