The Elder Brother

One of the classes I took in Divinity School was, “Introduction to Pastoral Counseling.” The professor in that class believed birth order has a tremendous influence on our lives. Whether you are an only child, a first child, a middle child, or the youngest child in a family makes a big difference in how you grew up and it shapes your approach to life.

My professor went on to say that, in his experience, pastors tend to be eldest children. After all, he said, although generalizations can be tricky, and there are many exceptions, eldest children tend to be the responsible types. They are eager to please their parents. They are given some responsibility for their younger siblings. They tend, more or less, to follow the rules. They are, for the most part, good citizens. To a remarkable degree, eldest children are concerned about doing the right thing. In their youth, they are the kind of people who may not be elected by their classmates to a leadership role, but they would certainly be appointed by their teacher for such a role. So, he said, is it any surprise that so many people who go into the ministry are eldest children? The role of pastor just seems to fit those who have been shaped by their experience as an eldest child.

At that point in my professor’s lecture I was feeling rather smug because, you see, I am the youngest of three children and, for the most part, younger children don’t like to conform.

But then he went on to demonstrate his point. He asked this class of, say, forty people: “How many of you are the oldest child in your family? Raise your hand.” About twenty-five hands were raised. Then he said, “And, of course, that includes only children.” Another five or so hands went up. At that point my smugness index was getting quite a boost. But then my professor added, “And those of you whose next oldest sibling is at least five years older than you are, you are functionally an eldest child, as well. So raise your hand.”

Busted. I had to raise my hand, as did a number of my classmates. You see, my brother is ten years older than I am and my sister is seven years older. As you looked over that “Introduction to Pastoral Counseling” there was just a tiny handful of students who were not eldest children or at least functionally eldest children.

So, yes, he made his point. The ministry is filled with eldest children.

But here’s a generalization I would add to those offered by my professor. Most of the people in the churches I have served are eldest children as well. Or, they are functionally eldest children. Or, they approach the world much as an eldest child does.
Is that true of you? I know I am dealing in generalities here, and it’s not true of everyone here, but as a generalization it is true to a remarkable degree. This is a room largely filled with eldest children or, at least, those who approach the world much as an eldest child does.

Eldest children are responsible. We get out of bed in the morning and go to church. We either get up early to read the paper or the paper can wait. We have a strong sense of responsibility. We sign up for things. We volunteer. We show up. We seek to improve ourselves and to improve our world. In our families, we are the go-to person (or, at least, one of the go-to-people). We always vote in civic elections and find it hard to imagine why some people don’t. And we do all of those things not be praised, or even thanked, but because it just seems like the right thing to do.

Does this sound like anyone you know? And if you are saying to yourself, “Well, sure, but that describes everyone, doesn’t it?” I would suggest that is a characteristic of an eldest or someone functionally eldest child, as well. We are so responsible we assume that is the natural approach to the world and every other approach is a deviation, and a somewhat mystifying one, at that. Isn’t everyone like that? Well… no.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son… And, by the way, isn’t that typical? The younger child gets all of the attention, even has a parable named after him, when all he did was run away and squander his father’s money. Isn’t that typical? Anyway, in the so-called Parable of the Prodigal Son, the eldest son is not presented very favorably.

The younger son—that brat—is the recipient of grace. He personifies the essence of the good news. He has done nothing to deserve the father’s love, but he receives it, anyway. He is the one who can sing of God’s “amazing grace”: “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Not because of anything he has done, but in spite of anything he has done, God receives him and loves him and by so doing turns his life around. That is the gospel story of redemption in miniature. The younger son personifies the essence of that story, that good news. So, yes, maybe it makes sense to name this story, The Parable of the Prodigal Son. And countless sermons have been preached on the redemption of the younger son.

But what of the elder son? Where is the good news for him? Where is the parable named after him? The eldest son labors in obscurity. And, if ever the eldest son is mentioned in a sermon, in my experience, he is likely to be portrayed as a self-righteous ruler-keeper, a party-pooper who takes himself so seriously, like H. L. Mencken’s definition of a Puritan: a person who is “desperately afraid that someone, somewhere is having a good time.”

So, yes, maybe the eldest brother didn’t immediately join the party his father threw for his younger brother. But is that so bad, really? Let’s remember the story. When the younger brother asked for his share of his father’s estate—essentially treating his father as dead already—the elder brother stayed and worked. When the younger brother left home, the elder brother stayed and worked—and probably had to work twice as hard because his younger brother wasn’t there to help anymore. While the younger brother relaxed in a far-off land, the elder brother worked. While the younger brother ate sumptuous meals,
the elder brother worked. While the younger brother enjoyed the easy company of women, the elder brother worked. When the younger brother came home, where was the elder brother? Working.

The younger brother gets to sing, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me…” It’s wonderful that he gets to sing that song. But where is the elder brother’s song? What song does he get to sing? I mean, “High ho, high ho, it’s off to work we go” never made it into our hymnal.

One of my favorite quotes is from a mother of many children who is asked if she has favorites. “Favorites?” she replies. “Yes, I have favorites. I love the one who is sickest until he is well. I love the one who is in trouble until she is safe again. And I love the one who is farthest away until he comes home.” That’s beautiful, isn’t it? I think that captures much of the good news of the gospel. That is what God is like. But what if you are one of this mother’s children and you are never the sickest, never the one who is trouble, never the one who is farthest from home? Does it still sound like good news?

All of the fuss and all of the celebration is over the Prodigal. But what of the one who stayed near the father’s house? He did not squander everything he had been given. He’d been careful. He abided by the rules. Elder brothers are good at abiding by the rules: “Just tell me what to do. I am good at fulfilling expectations.”

What is the gospel for those who just want to know what to do?

Well, one possibility is to help the elder brother (or the elder brother in us) to see that, even though he stayed close to home, he really is lost, after all. That, too, is part of the gospel. As the Apostle Paul put it, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” And, of course, that is true and a particularly important reminder to those who are tempted by the sin of self-righteousness. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

I like what Presbyterian minister Craig Barnes says about this. He says that it’s not that the elder brother is free of sin, but, “The sins of the elder brother are boring. The elder brother isn’t very good at sinning.” He goes on: “Every time I bring this up with elder brothers they get upset with me because they think I am telling them they are underachievers as sinners. And nothing is more offensive to an elder brother than to be an underachiever at anything, including sinning. But they are. When I have a counseling session with an elder brother, they offer their confession and I think, ‘That’s it? That’s what you got? Change seats with me. I can do much better than that.’

“And when they do offer a confession, it’s something like this: ‘Pastor, I’m coming to apologize. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, but my kids are getting ready to go to college, I’m having to work extra hours… so I don’t have as much time as I used to. But I am chairing our tutoring ministry in the inner schools and that has really taken off, but we’ve launched into three other schools and I have to supervise all of that and as a result of my mother’s illness I am having to move her into our back bedroom. So what I am here to say is would it be okay if I served as just the vice chair of the Stewardship Committee instead of the chair?’”
Barnes concludes: “Really? This is what you were up last night worried about?”

So, yes, it’s important to recognize that we are all sinners. That’s not an exclusive club. We are all members of that club. It’s good to be reminded of that.

But I don’t think that is the whole answer to the question: What is the gospel for responsible people? It is easy to see what the gospel means to the rule breakers. But what about the rule keepers? What is the gospel for us?

After all, what can be described as God’s grace, from the elder brother’s point of view can look a lot like unfairness. “Look how many years I have stayed here serving you,” he said to his father, “but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends?” Someone may call it grace, but the elder brother calls it unfair. Where’s the good news in that?

Well, for one, it can be exhausting to always be keeping score. It tears at you. Now, please understand I am not making a political comment here, but the example seems just too germane to pass up. When Mitt Romney spoke of the 47% of Americans who are dependent on the government and think of themselves as victims, he sounded like an elder brother (actually, he is like me—the youngest child in his family, but with six years between him and the next oldest child). But he sounded like an elder brother, not just in what he said, but in his tone of voice. The frustration, the exasperation in his voice at those who aren’t doing their part (or, at least, those he perceives are not doing their part). It sounded to me like the frustration and exasperation of an elder brother. That kind of frustration and exasperation tears at you if you are an elder brother. Constantly keeping score is not only exhausting, it can tear at you.

So, part of the good news for the elder brother is that he is invited to let of go of that. We don’t have to let that score-keeping mentality tear at us. God is not a score keeper. We might like God to be a score keeper—after all, we might get a pretty good score—but God is not a score keeper. The only kind of score God keeps is how many respond to God’s grace, how many join the party.

And if we are not keeping score, we can give up a bit of our anxiety. I think anxiety is one of the characteristics of elder brothers. Elsewhere in Luke’s gospel we read of another pair of siblings, Mary and Martha. Luke is not clear who is the elder, but I would bet you a denarius that Martha was the older sister. She is the one working in the kitchen, while her sister Mary sits at Jesus’ feet. Martha’s in the kitchen working, while Mary is sitting around with Jesus. Martha is understandably resentful, but Jesus says, “Martha, Martha you are anxious and troubled about many things…” There is something about comparisons and keeping score that makes a person anxious. So it is common for elder brothers and elder sisters to fret, to be big fretters. Some interpret Jesus’ comment to Martha as a criticism: “You are anxious about many things…” But there is another way to look at it. Perhaps Jesus was inviting this eldest child to let go of the anxiety that comes with comparisons and keeping score. Obviously, it is tearing you up. You can let it go.

And let’s remember that the eldest brother in the parable is invited to the party. He is invited to drink that special wine that the father was saving for a special occasion and to
eat that savory veal stew. The eldest brother is invited to dance, and to sing, and to laugh—just as much as the younger brother is.

When the younger brother approached his father’s house, the father did not wait for him to get to the front door. Rather, when the son was still far off, he ran out to his son. And when the eldest brother hesitated to go into the party, the father did it again. He did not wait for the elder brother to enter. The father went out to the elder brother, just as he had to the younger brother, and extended the same invitation. Come in. Let’s celebrate.

The occasion of the party is the younger brother’s return, but the elder brother is given the same invitation as the younger brother is. The eldest brother is invited to drink the same wine and eat the same food. He does not get any less. In fact, the father says to the elder brother, “Everything I have is yours.”

And that’s part of the gospel, too. That’s the part of the gospel that has the elder brother’s name on it. He is invited to the party. He does not get any less.

But here’s the thing. The parable ends before we know if the elder brother joins the party. This is one of those stories where we are invited to provide the ending. Does the elder brother join the party or does he stay outside?

You have to answer that for yourself. But here’s my guess. My guess is that the elder brother does join the party. And here’s why I think that—because I am looking at you, at all you elder brothers and those who approach the world like elder brothers. You are here in this celebration called worship. You are here to receive good news, good news that may take a particular form for those who were lost and are now found, but which is the good news of God’s grace that is extended to all of us. And I’m so glad you came to the party.