

In My Father's Eyes  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – Year C / Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Good morning – my name is Ethan. It is a good Jewish name, as names go; it means “solid, enduring,” which I feel like is a pretty good description of who I am or at least who I was. I felt pride in my solid, stoic, and faithful attitude. I reveled in it, it defined who I was, but I am getting ahead of the story. Ethan is a good name, but I am here today to tell you about my brother – Marni. Marni is Hebrew for “rejoice,” and that dear friends is where we begin.

I remember it like it was yesterday, though it is now almost 25 years ago. It was a beautiful sunny day in my native land in small fishing village on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. I was 10 years old and my mother had been pregnant for almost 9 months. With a sudden scream of pain and the rush of all the women in the village, it began – the moment that would change my life forever. My little brother Marni was born and from that moment on I was second string in the family, especially to my father whom I loved very much. You see, his birth was, they say, a miracle – for my mother was too old to have any more children. She was already older when she had me, and so Marni's birth was a miracle. It was, my father said, a cause for “rejoicing,” hence his name. And, rejoice he did – said special prayers in the synagogue, threw parties, and told everyone who would listen of the special child God had blessed him with. As Marni grew older, I thought the special attention would stop, but instead it continued. For instance, my father would come home from a trip to the market in town and bring something just for Marni. He received presents, special food, and more than all of that he received my father's constant and undivided affection.

And so in the process, it seemed, my father forgot about me. My heart was saddened and hurt to the deepest corners of my soul. But, I was not about to let my new little brother upstage me. I came up with a plan. I would be there for my father, do everything that was expected and asked of me and much more. I would watch the flocks of sheep. As I got older I would take over the work in the field, the planting, the tilling, the harvesting. I would be faithful to my name. I would be my father's “solid and enduring” son and in the process win my father's affections and turn his attention from “Miracle Marni,” as I now like to call him, to me the eldest and faithful son. I went to work on my plan. First months and then years began to pass. I grew in stature as well as in familial responsibility. I ran the homestead. As I had planned, my father depended on me for everything, but what I didn't plan on was that his love and attention for Marni would continue to outpace my best efforts to thwart them. He continued to be the apple of my father's eye. As love seemed to blind my father from the truth, Marni learned to simply use my father for his own selfish desires at every turn. I felt betrayed, lonely, desolate. How could my life end up like this, how could my father for all intents and purposes ignore me as he does? I was, it seemed to me, nothing more to him than a foreman of his vast empire. But I had created my path and was determined to follow it.

But one day, it happened. Out of the blue, it came flying out of my brother's mouth like a knife into my father's heart. Marni had come to my father with a request. No small request either. He wanted his inheritance, that's right, my barely 20 year old brother wanted our father, who had done nothing but lavish him with attention and stuff, to give him what he would receive as if my father had died. He wanted to leave home and “make his way” in the world. I could see the look of disappointment and sadness in my father's eyes as he handed over the money and wished my brother the best of fortune. Miracle Marni then hopped on a camel full of supplies and made his way out of the village toward the big time.

In all honesty, I can't truthfully say that I was sad to see him go. I saw this as an opportunity of sorts, a fresh start with my beloved father. Without Marni there to divide his attention, my father will have to acknowledge my contributions and grow stronger in his affection for me. And while this did happen to some extent, it was also apparent that as each day passed he continued to mourn the loss of the child that caused him to rejoice. Several months had gone by and we had heard no word from Marni. We heard that there was a famine in a far off land but did not know if he was there, yet somehow we knew. I think it became easier for my father to think of him as dead and to try and move on with his life. Slowly but surely, my father and me, his solid son, the one he could always depend on to be there and do the right thing began to grow closer. We would talk for hours: sometimes about unimportant stuff like local gossip and other times about the traditions of our family and peoples and our God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that is the God of Israel. I finally began to feel close to the one whom seemed to ignore me for so long.

Just as I began to be at peace in my life and in my heart, I heard a noise that made my heart sink. I was in the fields finishing the days work when I heard a noise drift on by my ears on the wind. But it was not just any noise, it was the sound of music. Celebratory music- music used to rejoice when something life-changing happened. Though I hadn't seen him, I knew. I knew, without even thinking that Miracle Marni was home. Home to receive the rejoicing of OUR father, home to take the love that we had begun to share and break it in two. "It's not fair," I screamed aloud, though no one could hear me. It thought to myself, I know what he did, he took his inheritance, my father's hard earned money and he blew it. He ate, drank, paid for prostitutes, ran up a tab at every bar in town, stayed in finest hotels, had a grand time and then he ran out of money and now he has come crawling home in insincere repentance hoping for handouts. And if I know my father, he will give them to him. Shoot he would give his "favorite" son the coat off his back.

So with much trepidation and dread, I began the walk back to the house. As I approached, my worst fears were realized. I called over one of our servants and asked what was going on. He said to me, "Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast – barbecued beef! Because he has come home safe and sound." I stalked off and refused to join in this sickening display of favoritism. My father then came out and tried to talk to me. But I was not going to hear any consolation, real or imagined. I said, "Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!" I was indignant. It just wasn't fair, I said to myself again; I had played by the rules. I had spent my whole life playing the part of the steady, solid, grounded son who fulfilled his responsibilities and I had nothing to show for it, not even it seemed the love of my own father.

It was then that it happened. My father walked up very close to me, he cupped my chin in his hands and with a deep, penetrating stare, he spoke. Not hurriedly, but deliberately, purposefully, and with love, "Son, Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours – but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!" It was surreal. I heard his voice; I could even make out the words but it was not any of that which moved me. It was instead, the look in my father's eyes. I had never noticed it before, though I am sure it was there. As he held my face in his hands, his eyes betrayed him. They betrayed a love deep down that would do and give anything, not just for my young prodigal brother, but for me as well, and I'm sure any other lost soul who need a home, needed a hand, needed someone to love them. It was in a very real way looking right into the eyes of God, our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of all creation. It was a look that said you are mine and nothing, not even your own, self-righteous, aggrandizing attitude can change that truth.

All of a sudden, I felt sick in the pit of my stomach, not because my brother was home or my father was throwing him a party, but because I realized it was not Marni who needed to repent but me. Through my own self-love, my own pride I had driven a wedge between myself and the one who loved me more than anyone – my father. It was me that needed my priorities set straight. It was me that needed a new change in direction and focus. It was me who needed forgiveness. I knew in that glorious moment of my own heart rejoicing that it was me, me who was lost and now am found, was dead but now alive. What grace, what amazing grace. Thanks be to God!