

Big Brother Is Watching

sermon digest

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Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

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According to ABC News, sales for George Orwell's 1949 classic novel *1984* leaped by 3,000 percent on Amazon following the media leak of National Security Agency telephone surveillance programs. Orwell's novel was about the then distant future, 1984, and a fictional dictatorship Oceania where the watchful eye of Big Brother (Big Government) had the technical ability to track every move of every citizen. In the novel, Big Brother surveillance was 24-7, constantly watching for the slightest citizen infraction of the rules governing a totally controlled society.

One might justly speculate that the big brother in Jesus' parable was a factor in producing the prodigal son. If you know anything about families, siblings have a way of developing in reaction to one another. I recall a family crisis in my church a few decades back. The fourteen-year-old son left home and moved in with a friend. The friend's parents asked for my help to persuade the boy to go home. In the process I consulted with his counselor who advised that this was a white knight-black knight situation. I learned that his older brother was the perfect son, conforming in every way to parental expectation, a white knight. The sibling rivalry led to the younger son's determination to cut out his own identity in opposition to the perfect son; misbehavior became his trademark.

Grace stands taller than justice. In our Gospels, the parables of Jesus have a context. A specific event, identified persons, or a particular situation evokes a story with a lesson for the context. An obvious audience is usually the first clue to understanding the intended lesson. The parable featuring two sons is clearly a response to the comment of the Pharisees and scribes critical of Jesus: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The behavior of the younger son was an excellent example of just the kind of person with whom Jesus was accused of associating. The censorious attitude of the elder brother in Jesus' story is a mirror image of the critical scribes and Pharisees. So we should not stop with the return of the prodigal son and the assumption that the primary point is a gracious, loving father God, however important to our faith story. The story of Jesus addresses the context, the criticism that Jesus cavorts with bad companions.

The three parables raise a practical concern. Would not a good shepherd leave ninety-nine sheep in the fold to go out in search of the one lost sheep? Would not a woman who lost a coin persist in searching the house until it is found? Would not a loving father who has been hurt by the bad behavior of a wayward son welcome the boy home meeting repentance with forgiveness? The primary question becomes, how should the older brother respond?

Every brother or sister of us can well understand the swollen resentment of the elder son in Jesus' parable. As a matter of justice, he has every right to scold his father and to resent his brother. Christians with a social conscience are always talking about justice for "the least, the last, and the lost." Is there no room in our hearts for the most, the first, and the best? Successful people also need compassion. The word Pharisee has come to be a synonym for hypocrite in common usage. We have been prejudiced by the scathing commentary attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, the refrain, "woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" in Matthew 23. We have assumed that these self-righteous, pompous legalists were the worst of the worst. Not so! The Pharisees were actually much closer to the teachings of Jesus than their rivals the Sadducees. They were more likely to be populists. They were laymen, while the Sadducees were of the elite priestly class. And, Pharisees, like later Christians and Jews valued the authority of the Prophets and the larger Old Testament writings rejected by the Sadducees.

The most surprising feature of this parable is the element of compassion and understanding in addressing the elder brother, the scribes and Pharisees. Although Luke is the Gospel that focuses on the excluded, mistreated ranks of society, this story does not condemn the elder brother for resenting grace and accepting sinners. In fact, the loving father is patient and gracious toward the faithful son, "all that is mine is yours"; but in the family, grace is more important than perfect justice; the value of one's brother is greater than the value of the inheritance. We liberal Christians who insist on an attitude of grace toward offenders need to recognize the imbalanced scales of justice. A gracious father means cavorting with offensive folks and becoming an agent of grace through a shared inheritance.

Will Campbell died on June 3, 2013. Campbell was a Baptist minister educated at Wake Forest University and Yale Divinity School. He was a pastor in Louisiana before becoming Director of Religious Life at the University of Mississippi in 1954, which he had to leave in 1956 because of his support for racial

integration. He went on to serve as racial consultant for the National Council of Churches, a public advocate for Martin Luther King, Jr., and a highly successful novelist, public speaker, and humorist entertainer.

At one point in his career Campbell fell from grace with many of his socially liberal friends for cavorting with the enemy. Campbell had the audacity to think that Christian grace meant reaching out to racists, even the KKK. Did not Jesus call disciples to love their enemies? The very criticism leveled at Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees fell on Will Campbell for showing hospitality to racist bigots and eating with members of the Klan. But Campbell shocked the world with his judgment that Southern racists, poor whites, and Klansmen were as much victims of the culture as the African Americans who had become targets of their hatred. Growing up in a poor, rural, southern family helped Will to understand the distorted vision of his southern brothers; and his place in the family of God empowered Will to meet hatred with compassion and grace in order to find peace in reconciliation.

Of course justice is important for the people of God, especially for followers of Christ; but be aware that our concept of justice may not measure up to the grace of God in our brother Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor (*Christian Century*, March 11, 1998, p. 257) envisioned a “sinners table” at the local Huddle House where the Ministerial Association gathers for their monthly luncheon. She pictures the sinners table: an abortion doctor, a child molester, an arms dealer, a garbage collector, a young man with AIDS, a Laotian chicken plucker, a teenage crack addict, an unmarried woman with five children by three different fathers. Jesus sits at the head of the table asking the AIDS victim to hand him a roll and offering a cup of coffee to the doctor. The ministers sit down to pray over their food which they handle with well-washed hands and eat with good teeth, but they can hardly choke down their steaks for staring at the unsightly mob at the next table.

Brown perceives the sympathy that Jesus must have had for the man who could not get his two sons to sit down at the same table either. The younger son is warped by a just sense of unworthiness for where he has been and what he has done. Truly he was “no longer worthy to be called. . . son.” The older son was so inflated with his sense of entitlement that he would not share a table with anyone who had not earned a place. Both suffered from the illusion that they could be the sons of their father without being brothers to each other.

Grace is a gift. As I have said before, the genius of this parable was the connection to daily life not only in the time of Jesus, but a connection that seems to hold firm in every generation and every culture. All of us tend to find in this parable a mirror to “my family” and “my self.” I recall a conversation with my brother about the TV show “Two and a Half Men.” My psychologist brother had to ask, “which brother do you think you are, Allen or Charlie?” It had not occurred to me that we might see ourselves in this grossly promiscuous fiction. But then I remembered our childhood. Robert’s favorite TV show was “Leave It to Beaver,” a family program for children featuring Beaver the elementary school boy and his brother Wally, the young teen. There we were, Robert and Larry. Robert was the maverick son who chose a secular life as a university professor. I was the dutiful older brother who lived at the church nearly as much as Samuel in the Old Testament and chose to enter the ministry. Much to my chagrin I was the older brother who in fact demonstrated some of the behavior of Big Brother Wally, but also much of the behavior of the elder brother in the parable of Jesus. My family rank helped me to justify bully behavior and a censorious attitude toward the kid, but, in truth, I have always been aware that I was not the paragon of virtue that my place in the family and choice of vocations might have implied. In spite of some sibling rivalry, we have always loved and respected one another; and I don’t think that either of us ever had a sense that our parents favored one over the other. We actually enjoy remembering our youth and poking fun at one another over typical childish behaviors.

At bottom, the message for all of us, especially for big brothers, is a lesson about grace. The one major flaw in Pharisaic theology was not their holiness or their ignorance of the Bible. It was their assumption that life must be so austere that no room can remain for grace. Earlier in Luke, Jesus noted that the same critics attacked John the Baptist for refusing bread and wine, while condemning Jesus for eating and drinking with sinners. Their censorious spirit could not be satisfied, and the tragedy of their behavior was that they, not the young prodigal, end up outside in the dark feeling hurt and rejected.

The very word grace, *charis* is undeserved, unearned gift. The problem is the expectation that family love must be earned rather than given. Anyone who dares to leap to the conclusion that Jesus intended to bash Jews as self-righteous hypocrites has to be blind to church history. The established church became the older brother steadily persecuting and sometimes executing the younger brother who did not conform

to expected behavior. The Christian gospel comes down finally to one very important word—grace. The grace of the loving father must become the grace of reconciliation in the redeemed son and the grace of the father's love in the ranking authority of the older brother. Who are you?