Once Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they had finally been defeated and returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take extreme revenge on them, but he answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." It is the wonder of God's love that he treats us like that.

In our passage, the prodigal elder brother isn't ready for a party and a family reunion. The elder brother represents all of us who think we can make it on our own, all of us who might be proud of the kind of lives we live. Here is the contrast between those who want to live by justice and merit and those who must ask for grace. We cannot share in the Father's grace if we demand that he deal with us according to what we deserve. Sharing in God's grace requires that we join in the celebration when others are recipients of that grace also. Part of the fellowship with Christ is receiving with others who do not deserve our forgiveness or God's grace. Each person is of such value to God, however, that none is excluded from God's grace. Neither should we withhold our forgiveness.

Commentary Lesson

Most of us grew calling the parable in Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son. We can focus our attention on the younger son who squandered his inheritance and comes home a broken man desperately in need of grace and forgiveness. But if we aren't careful we can overlook the audience that Jesus originally addressed - to the Pharisees, the older brothers. The story is one of three that Jesus tells in a row after the Pharisees and scribes have taken him to task for eating with sinners. Jesus responds by telling them stories about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to fend for themselves while he went after one stray, about a woman who turned her house upside down in order to find one lost coin, and about a compassionate father who dealt graciously with his two sons. All three stories address the Pharisees' concern that Jesus is condoning sin by keeping the company he keeps, and all three reply that God is too busy rejoicing over found sheep, found coins, and found children to worry about what they did while they were lost.

Much has been written about the younger brother and his return home. But the older brother, who never left home, reveals his utter lostness when his brother comes home. I can identify with Barbara Brown Taylor who writes in her book *The Preaching Life*, "I am an eldest child myself, after all. I know what it is like to break parents in, to step aside as they exercise their new improved skills on younger siblings and then to take the rap for the little criminals when they mess up. Older siblings frequently get the raw end of the deal, as the elder brother in the
parable at hand. My guess is that he was not incensed by his younger brother's return, or even his father's forgiveness of him, but by the celebration. Let the penitent come home, by all means, but let him come home to penance, not a party. Where is the moral instruction in that kind of welcome? What about facing the consequences of your actions? What kind of world would this be if we all made a practice of rewarding sinners while the God-fearing folk are still out in the fields?"
Imagine the elder brother, he had stayed home and dutifully worked hard for his father in the fields. He stands for the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. His attitude shows a lack of sympathy. He refers to his brother as your son, not as his brother. Let's not forget though, that the elder brother, perhaps had a right to feel a sense of anger and grief toward his baby brother. After the younger brother left to find himself in the far country, the work load for the older brother increased. The older brother was overworked and resentful and he imagines the fun and wild living his baby brother enjoyed at spring break. How the younger brother spent all of his money doesn't matter, but the elder brother believed it did, because he thinks he has committed sin with harlots.
Perhaps we can see ourselves in the elder brother. As the people of God this parable can vividly and powerfully remind us to not be judgmental and to be gracious and welcoming to all people. This story teaches us that Jesus paid much too high a price for us to pick and choose who should come. As a people called United Methodists this parable calls upon us to take seriously our motto - Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.
The parable Leaves us with the question of whether the elder brother joined the celebration. Did he go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting, feeling wronged? The parable ends there because that is the decision each of us must make. If we go in, we accept grace as the Father's rule for life in the family.

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