

Enough about the other brother

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I often worry that churches are too full of people who are not disappointments.

Bear with me here. I love the story of the Prodigal Son. I love the idea that no matter what we do in life, no matter how much we mess up, God will still welcome us when we decide to come home.

But many times as I've heard this text preached about in a sermon (or preached it myself), something strange has happened: the story of the Prodigal Son has become the story of the Prodigal Son's Brother.

This may have something to do with the churches I've found myself at along the way. More often than not these have been parishes filled with the sort of responsible brothers and sisters who pay the bills on time, call their parents regularly, and change the oil in the car long before the light goes off. In short, these are the people who have never been disappointments.

These are the sort of folks who can resonate with the angry brother who has stayed and worked on the farm while his younger brother wasted the family's money in the city. And now that same brother is home again, and dad just can't wait to give him another chance.

Except that's not exactly true. The reality is that even when we look like we have our lives together, even when we look to all the world like the loyal son or daughter, we have all been disappointments at one time or another. We have been prodigal sons

who have hit some kind of rock bottom. Maybe no one knew it but us, but we knew it. And it shook us to our core.

The reality is that both brothers live inside of us, the responsible one and the prodigal one. It is an uneasy coexistence made worse by the reality that neither is perfect, and that both make real mistakes. The dutiful brother's lack of compassion and grace when his brother returns is indeed worth our attention. But he's not the only one.

Of all the places in our life, church should be the one place where we can all admit that we are sometimes the other brother, too. Even when others admire the highlight reels of our lives, each of us knows that there is a lot sitting back there on the cutting room floor. We need a place where we can say that, and hear it from others too.

In Lent we get honest about the fact that we sometimes disappoint God. The good news is that we also get to hear the truth: God is waiting to come running down the road and welcome us back. Dutiful son, prodigal son, or a little bit of both...God knows us already, and God can't wait for us to come home.