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Church of the Oldest Child

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Text: Luke 15:11-32

If you had a choice, would you belong to the Church of the Oldest Child? Or would you rather belong to the Church of the Loving Parent?

“Oh, of course, I’d rather belong to the Church of the Loving Parent! Didn’t I just read Jesus’ story of the two sons? How could anyone choose the oldest child’s church?” But I wonder. Sometimes I think that in reality we have churches of the oldest child, and they must really struggle before they can reach out from far off to demonstrate the love of the forgiving parent.

Sometimes I know the oldest child’s church by its locked doors and the bell or buzzer I must ring, so someone will talk to me on the voice box. When I enter this church, I find there is nothing happening if it’s not Sunday, women’s sewing circle day, choir rehearsal time, or catechism evening. Sometimes I see that this is the oldest child’s church when the monthly calendar only has congregational activities scheduled on it, excepting the occasional wedding. Or I see the oldest child’s church when missions and outreach budgets are minimal or don’t exist.

But the oldest child’s church troubles me more when I encounter the attitudes of pastor(s) and members because from these it becomes obvious who is acceptable and who is tragically not predestined to be there. As one who sometimes feels like the younger child who is far from perfect or who has not been a life member, I would like to know what I must do or

how long I must suffer before I'm acceptable to this church—and also to God. (Isn't the congregation part of experiencing God's love—a mediating institution?)

But I don't only question whether I will be acceptable; I also wonder about my friends:

- a woman who has had a baby before marriage?
- an adult whose parent was/is alcoholic?
- a couple who has just gone bankrupt?
- a minority person?
- a mentally retarded youth who wants to come to catechism but cannot read?
- a young person who has rebelled and wished he had not been so angry or so independent and confrontative?
- a person who suffered a psychiatric break or nervous breakdown?
- a refugee who has a hard time with English?
- a family which has not been able to save money or purchase a home?
- a person in a wheelchair who can't come up the stairs?
- a waitress who cannot get a better job?
- or maybe you or me?

How long do we have to wait, or what do we really have to do, to come back into God's good graces? Is there a way to return or do we have to guess what we need to do to be acceptable again? People around Jesus were asking, "What must I do to be clean again?" Because they or we could never catch up with the oldest child, the Pharisees, or the other members of the congregation who are "virtuous".

As a Mennonite, I do believe in church discipline, but I'm not sure what the oldest child's church will accept or hear so that I can again come into God's good graces. Can anyone with a checkered history find acceptance before God?

Well, there is an ideal Church of the Loving Parent. It's probably not too far from the Church of the Oldest Child! Some attitude changes within the congregation; a sense of humour and self awareness of our own inability to be pure; an increased sense of missions and outreach: These would all help us get there.

And when we get there, others will join us because they will feel the love and compassion from far away and know that

they are welcome and wanted. For all my years, I've been told that "God is love". Now I want to have my church be part of the Churches of the Loving Parent!