

As some of you know, I spent a good part of college as a Biochemistry major. And one of my specific areas of interest was genetics. Genetics has always fascinated me. How DNA, this tiny particle of information, could be responsible for such enormous complexity in the human body. And how such tiny changes could have drastic effects on how that information is expressed.

Siblings are a perfect example of this. The average siblings – whether two brothers, two sisters, or brother and sister – have 99.95% of their genetic code in common. Only .05% difference separates them. If I were to show you two pictures that were different by only .05%, you could spend hours studying them and never find the difference between the two.

And yet, in the human body, that tiny difference results in two entirely distinct people. In fact, that tiny difference can often result in two people who share very little in common, aside from their parents. I know my sisters and I are extremely different. Sure, we share some common traits. But our appearance, our personality, our skills and talents, our taste in food and music and a whole host of other things... completely different.

And as dissimilar as we are, I've known siblings who were even more unlike. I know two sisters. One married a good Christian man, settled down, and raised a family. The other joined a wiccan cult, stole credit cards from her friends and family, and got herself arrested for welfare fraud.

I know two brothers. One got two girlfriends pregnant, left home as soon as he could, and has struggled with drug and alcohol addiction his entire life. His brother? Never left home. He waits tables at a restaurant and spends his weekends playing computer games. Same parents. Similar childhood. .05% difference... and yet two entirely different people.

We see two brothers like that in our Gospel lesson today. An older brother and a younger brother. The older brother is the good son. He's obedient and trustworthy. He does his chores. He works at the family business. He has friends, but he doesn't party. He's never gone too far from home. He doesn't complain. He spends his money wisely. And there's every indication that he'll marry a nice girl, inherit the family business, settle down in the town he grew up in, and spend the rest of his days content and peaceful.

The other brother? Not so much. He's rebellious and stubborn. He parties. He drinks. He can't keep a job. And most of all, he refuses to listen to his aging father. Around and around and around they fight, day after day, week after week. It doesn't matter what his father says or how he says it. He can be calm and polite and rational. He can yell and criticize and punish. It doesn't really matter. His son isn't going to listen. He's going to go off and do his own thing anyway.

Finally, one day, things come to a head. He and his father get into a huge argument. The son is clearly in the wrong, but he doesn't care. He can't stand living under his father's roof anymore. He screams at his father, "I just wish you just die, old man. At least then I would have my inheritance. It's the only good thing you'll ever give me."

His father throws up his hands. "Fine. You want my money. Take it. You can go off with your friends and pretend I'm dead." He writes out a check, hands it to his son, and walks away.

And so the son leaves. But he doesn't just go down the street to a friend's house. Or down the road to the nearest large town. No, he travels. He travels hundreds of miles, to a completely different country. Until he's in the biggest, most luxurious city he can find. Far enough away that he really can pretend that his father is dead.

And he burns through that money on every foolhardy, immoral, selfish form of entertainment he can find. Not because he particularly enjoys himself, but because if he's alone with his thoughts for even a moment, he might remember his father's words of wisdom and the goodness of his home.

Of course, we know what happens next. He spends all the money. His friends abandon him. He ends up working on pig farm just to survive. He reaches rock bottom. And he decides to come home and beg for a job as a servant.

But when he arrives, he's welcomed back with open arms. With a party in his honor. And a ring on his finger to mark him as a member of the family once again. And robe on his back to cover up clothes covered in pig filth.

That's the last we hear about the younger brother. We don't hear about what happens when he finally met his older brother again. I kinda wonder what the scene looked like.

We know the older brother was angry about his younger brother's treatment. He may have taken his frustration out on him. Heaped insults and scorn on him. Told him just how ashamed he should be of himself, and how much better of a son he himself had been.

But then again, maybe not. Because I'm not sure he needed to. The younger brother had already heaped insults and scorn on himself. He already knew his shame. He already knew how bad a son he had been. In fact, as frustrated as the older brother was, I think there's every possibility that these two brothers understood each other better at that point than they ever had in their entire lives.

Because, in reality, they were now both approaching their place in the family from the same perspective. They both believed that their father's inheritance was something that they were supposed to earn. The older son thought he should be proud of earning it by obedience and hard work and responsibility. The younger son thought he should be ashamed and humiliated that he had taken what he hadn't earned.

Neither one was thinking about what their father thought. They had made up their minds without ever thinking about what he wanted. The inheritance was his to give, after all. And truth be told, he didn't care whether or not they had earned it. They were his sons. He loved them. He just... loved them, as fathers do. And there was nothing they could do to change that. Nothing they could do to earn that.

So now comes the question: which son are you? And before you answer, let me just say: that's a trick question. Because, chances are, you're both. You were born the younger son. You were born at odds with your heavenly Father. You were born unable to accept anything he told you, arguing with him at every turn, squandering everything he gave you. You avoided even thinking about him. You wished he would just die.

And so he did. God became flesh and died so that you might receive his inheritance. So that you might be a part of his family. His household. His kingdom. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Knowing that we would take this gift and continue to wander off into sinful lives. Knowing that we would continually repent and return to him, covered in the filth of our sin. Still unable to comprehend his love for us. How we could still be welcomed back into the family and clothed with his righteousness.

But the fact that you're here, sitting in these pews this morning, means you're not only the younger son. You're also the older son. Responsible. Trustworthy. Devoted. You're not perfect, but in general, you listen to your heavenly Father and you do what he says.

And that's great. But that's not why you're going to receive your inheritance from him. Because when it comes right down to it, you're not that much different than your brother. All those people out there, who aren't in church this morning. Yeah... they're God's children too. And he loves us both as his sons and daughters.

The only difference between us is when we choose to take our inheritance and what we do with it. Are we going to choose to take our inheritance in this life and burn through the joys that God has for us in foolishness, immorality, and selfishness? Or are we going to trust in the Lord, take the little gifts he gives us in this life, use them responsibly, and wait until the time is right to enjoy our inheritance for an eternity?

Two brothers. So different. And yet so alike. So convinced that they knew what was best. So unable to see that the thing they had most in common was how much their father loved them. Amen.