

**More than the first-borns**  
13 June 2021  
High Street Uniting Church Frankston  
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**Read: 1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13; and 2 Corinthians 5: 6-17**

*Show us your ways, Lord, teach us your paths. Guide us in your truth and teach us, for you are God our Savior, and our hope is in you all day long. Amen.*

In the story that Jesus tells about the Prodigal Son, there are two sons. The older son is more conservative, always keen to do the right thing, and has a strong sense of responsibility. The younger son is rebellious, and, I'd want to say, foolish. But, of course, for any parents, the first child is treated carefully and taught diligently; for the youngest child, the rules may start to get a bit less rigid; and in this story, the youngest is allowed to walk away with what would have been his inheritance. And he squanders it. Coming home repentant, he's welcomed back with loving arms and warm celebration. Which is all remarkable and wonderful, but for the older child, it feels unfair. And as an oldest child myself, the story doesn't seem fully resolved!

There are multiple layers in this story, of course, but the reason why it works and resonates as a story is that it's entirely imaginable, even if the Father's love in the story is truly wonderful. At least for the youngest child. But I'm not bitter.

As a first-born, I have all the classic traits. My parents were paying close attention to my growth, making sure that I learnt all I needed to at the right times, and of course I learnt to do the right things, to care about the family, to be an older brother full of wisdom and adult-ish-ness, and have a well-developed sense of responsibility. With my tongue somewhat in my cheek, I can say that there are good reasons why in Biblical times the first-born is given the double inheritance (if not all of it). We are the responsible ones who will carry on the family name.

(And so, by the way, when Paul writes in the New Testament about how, by the Spirit, we are all children of God, and *all heirs* of God, joint-heirs with Christ, it's not small thing – plenty of children would not expect to also be heirs.)

I say that I have all the classic traits of a first-born, but it's also true that I've followed a path in Christian faith which was not strong in my family. I'm not sure if that counts as rebellion.

It's the middle children who are more classically the rebellious ones, because there was always a child a bit older than them with whom they couldn't directly hold their own. And then we have the youngest one.

I'm going play with some big generalisations knowing that every family is different and there are loads of variations. But classically, in a big family, the first child is a whole new

learning curve for parents, and every scratch and scrape is attended to. Parents are usually less anxious about the second, or third, or fourth... and if you get down to the eighth or twelfth child (which is less common in our culture) the youngest is either the celebrated and mollycoddled baby of the family, or are assumed to be alright and able to pick themselves up and fend for themselves. At least, these are the extremes as we see them in the Bible.

For example, Joseph is an example of the mollycoddled one – the favourite young child, with a multicoloured or long-sleeved coat, who was despised by his older brothers and packed off to Egypt with slave-traders, only to end up being the one who saved the whole family; and David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, who was sent out to deal with the sheep, and any marauding bears or wolves, and was otherwise generally forgotten. Joseph and David both end up being chosen by God to do remarkable things.

So my question is: what does God think God is doing, passing over a perfectly good first-born?

I'm framing it like this quite deliberately, because I think it's no accident that God passes over the first-born in lots of these stories. Christian faith is often characterised as conservative. First-borns, to generalise of course, are pretty good at conservative – keeping up the traditions and the rules. But there is more to faith than conservatism. God needs more creative types to progress the movements of compassion and justice and reconciliation and hope and peace, and to share the stories of the Christ who broke the mould as he proclaimed God's Prodigal love. There is every chance that if God had just only worked through the first-borns, including Jesse's first son, then Israel, or the church, would have just been increasingly stifled by leaders who were good at doing the right thing but losing sight of the passion and purpose and liveliness of faith.

Because indeed, what we hear in this story is that God looks on the heart. Even under the layers of the personalities that we develop to navigate our places in the families we're brought up in, God looks underneath even that to see our hearts beneath.

What we discover about David is that he has faith in God, he has gratitude for what God does around him, he has an open heart, even when he messes up – and he does – and he is willing to respond to God's call.

God is keen to develop all of our characters in this way, and in the New Testament Paul describes how the Spirit is at work in us, and how we're invited to attend to the Spirit's work with open hearts.

Part of the joy and challenge of this is that we are not always good judges of people. Paul himself, you might remember, was originally a Jewish devotee who was happy to see Christians martyred. But God saw that even underneath that there was a good heart. If we had seen Paul at that stage, most of us would not have seen the same potential that God saw.

As a defender of tradition, I think Paul might have been a first-born, but God sees his heart and by the Spirit releases that heart to love. It happened through Paul himself learning not to judge by appearance, not to dismiss the Christ on the cross, seeing him just from a human point of view; but seeing GOD at work in him and in his resurrection and life.

In our story today, the one who was overlooked even by their own family turned out to have more to offer than maybe even he thought. Underneath our personalities and defences God looks to release our hearts to be open and faithful and creative and willing, because God needs more than just the conservative first-borns to bring passion and freedom and love to the world.

To the glory of God.

Amen.