

“A Father and Two Sons”
Sermon delivered 3-14-10
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus].² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."³ So he told them this parable:^{11b} "There was a man who had two sons.¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Traditionally, we have heard this parable as the parable of the “Prodigal Son”. Being one of the most familiar parables of Jesus, it makes it difficult for us hear the story with fresh ears. Naming it the “Prodigal Son” directs our attention to only one particular aspect of the story, the younger brother, when in fact the

parable opens with “There was a man who had two sons...”. We seem to ignore the man and the other son in this parable. So, this morning, I would like for us to step back and see the big picture, the whole picture, and see where we fit in the picture.

The story opens 10 verses before this parable with the “Pharisees and the scribes grumbling and saying, “This fellow (Jesus) welcomes sinners and eats with them”. Jesus responds with three parables one after another, beginning with the Lost Sheep, then the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son.

The parable opens with the younger son asking his father for his share of the property. The father divides the property between his two sons, he gives it all away, everything he owns. Biblically, the younger son seems to be the underdog from Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Ishmael and Isaac who pull a fast one. There is a temptation to romanticize the younger brother from Cain to Isaac, the younger son asking his father for the inheritance. But wait, what if one of your children came to you today and said, “Mom/Dad - give me my inheritance I am leaving.” What would you do? So, the younger son asking the father for his inheritance is the equivalent of saying “Drop Dead Dad”. The Father does drop dead at the beginning of the story by dividing the property between his sons. If this parable could be named anything, I would prefer it be called the “Prodigal Father”, he gives it all away to his sons, everything he owns.

So, as you know, the younger son takes the money, squanders it, (the elder brother says he squanders it on loose women). A severe famine takes place, and he is broke, forced to tending to the pigs, which according to the Talmudic Tradition, he is cursed. This would be like our sons and daughters asking for the inheritance, leaving home, spending all of it, and then situations beyond their control force them to deal in meth, crack, or cocaine to survive.

It is suspected that everyone hears this parable in the same light. Mark Allen Powell, who will be the main speaker at our Synod Convention here in Boise, checked out this assumption. He found that, the Russian ear doesn't blame how he handled his money, but blame the fact that he is an immigrant in a far country. Of course in Russia, many 1st generation immigrants go broke because they don't know the customs. In Africa, they hear the young man's situation being caused by the famine in the land, you starve and will do anything when there is a severe famine. We hear it in a different light.

Regardless of what light we hear and see this story, we know he came to himself. I hear the story (Luke may not intended it this way) of the young man like any young man or woman in such a situation as coming to his senses with a plan. First, he will address his father saying “I have sinned against heaven and you.” Second, say how not worthy he is, and third, ask his father to treat him as a hired hand. A good plan for the comeback kid! Who among us hasn't thought in such a manner? Still, I struggle to see repentance in the plan. There is the line “treat me as a hired hand”. A self-help

approach, another chance to earn my way back. Not a bad plan, or a terrific plan, but nonetheless a plan. Who can cast the first stone of never having a plan or expressing an apology without remorse?

When the father sitting on the porch sees his younger son coming down the road, he runs to him. This is totally lacking in dignity, and the Pharisees would have been appalled at the notion of a father running. The younger son has his script down... "Father I have sinned...", he never get to finish the script. The father doesn't respond or react to the script. He commands the servants to get the best robe, a ring, and sandals for his feet. Party time, kill the calf, and celebrate! My son was lost and dead, now he is alive and found!

Wait, isn't confession a prelude and a condition to forgiveness? No, confession is what we do to celebrate the forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about Deal or no Deal, it is not about "Let's make a negotiation, a deal, or a transaction. There is a "Wideness in God's Mercy," that even the Lutheran Saint Bonheoffer couldn't see. This story is about the Father, not the younger son's plan, or his desire to start over again, but death and rising again. It is about a new life, not bargaining to be the hired hand.

Why do we want to focus on the behavior of the sons, and not on the graciousness of the father? The father throws a party, not for the younger son, but for himself. Most of the parables end with a party. The party is not for the lost sheep, but for the Shepherd, not for the lost coin, but for the woman, not for the son, but for the father. Kill the fatted calf, have a party! This is a parable of the fathers JOY!

Can you hear the band playing, see the folks dancing and laughing, drinking German beer, and singing? It is all about JOY! Jesus is holding a mirror up for Pharisees to see the graciousness of God. They were not bad people. They were good people whose goodness clouded their judgment toward others. Like many of us, they were faithful in their attendance at the synagogue, read and studied scripture, gave alms to the poor, children, and widows. Like E.F. Hutton, they did it the old fashion way, they earned it. But, it is hard to earn JOY.

What are the joyous moments in your life? When do they happen? What is the fabric of JOY? Jesus in the Gospel of St. John speaks of the joy being in you, and being complete. If joy is like growth, it happens naturally, so if you not growing then the question to ask is what is blocking the joy in my life? If you are critical, bitter, or resentful, like the other son.

It is important for us to remember this parable is about a father who had TWO sons. We tend to focus on the younger son, because the parable is called "The Prodigal Son." The "other" son pops up at the end of the story, with the party going full blast. I am certain you can relate to the elder brother, who owns everything. The father divided the property between them. So, killing the calf, the giving of the robe, ring, and sandals...all these things belong to the elder son,

and the father is giving it away. Of course, he is standing outside looking in, with resentment and bitterness. When we are in such a situation we say "It is Not Fair!" We don't like seeing anybody get away with anything, from cutting in line to conniving his or her way up the ladder.

So, let us go outside and listen to the conversation... the elder son comes in from working in the field, hears the music, sees the party, and makes an inquiry with the slaves as to what is going on. They say, your brother came home and your father gave him a party, killing the fatted calf. He is angry. The father pleads with him to understand, but he blows his father off saying, "all these years I worked like a slave for you - you never gave a party for me. But when that son of yours comes back, the comeback kid who devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed a calf for him!"

Listen to what the elder is saying. He sees himself as an obedient slave, operating on the reward and punishment system. This is "If and then", a cause and effect way of thinking. How often are we in the Body of Christ are faithful, hard working, but missing the JOY? Missing it as the elder obedient slave son is missing the JOY? Can we move from a reward and punishment image of God to the Prodigal Father image that throws parties for outsiders? Both the elder and the younger are outsiders. The Elder doesn't want to come in. What does the father say? "All I have is yours." He has it all, but is lacking the JOY. The mission of Christ is that this JOY may be in you, and it may be complete.

The truth is, we are all outsiders coming up with a good plan to get back home, or are outside the party, refusing to go in. Where are you in the story this morning? If you are in the far country, welcome home, put on your dancing shoes and get ready to party! If you are standing outside this morning, hear God saying to You "Son/Daughter you have always been with me and all that is mine is yours". Come in, come in, give up your notion of being the "obedient slave", come in, lighten up little, and grab a little glass or two of Chardonnay. Enjoy the party; this is what the kingdom of God is like!