

Y'ALL COME!

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, CA
September 11, 1983

Luke 15:11-32

"Let's have a party!" is the response of the angels, Jesus said, when a sinner repents. "There is joy in heaven," he said.

"Let's have a party!" was the response of the father in Jesus' parable (read for us as the Gospel lesson this morning) when his lost son was found and came home.

Jesus enjoyed parties. We can learn much about the character of Jesus by analyzing the criticisms leveled against him. When the religious folk of his day criticized Jesus, they often made comments such as: "He likes to party...he is a regular glutton...he likes to eat...he likes his wine." And most offensive to them, Jesus liked to party with the common people, the people at the bottom of the social ladder upon whom others stepped, the poor.

"Let's have a party!" is a repeated theme of the gospels. Partying is the essence of heaven. Partying is the essence of the kingdom of God. Salvation is a party. Y'all come! As we sang in the hymn, No. 102, "Come, sinners to the gospel feast; let every soul be Jesus' guest."

When Jesus discussed the things of God, he often used human examples. What is it like in heaven? What is like in the kingdom of God? What is it like to be in a saving relationship, a reconciled relationship, with God? What is it like to be loved by God and love in return? It is like a party!

Our lesson this morning is the well-known and well-loved parable of the prodigal son, or the wayward son. The younger son asked his share of the inheritance, squandered it and ended in poverty worse off than the pigs he tended. He then decided to humbly go home to ask forgiveness, not for reinstatement, but for a job. He swallowed his pride, hung his head in shame, prepared to face the "I told you so's" and went home. When his father saw him, his father rejoiced and exclaimed, "Let's have a party!"

When one is reconciled to God--comes back home, admits errors, asks for mercy--God rejoices and throws a party. And the party is not just any old party! Look at the party Jesus described in this parable.

The son was dressed in the best clothes. "Bring out the finery," exclaimed the father. "Nothing is too good for my son." Jeweled rings were placed on the son's fingers.

There was embracing, kissing and affection at the party. Jesus said that when the father saw the son, he ran to him, embraced him and kissed him. Love was not just in the eyes or in words, but in the arms, in touching and healing.

The prize calf was butchered for the feast. It was a gourmet feast, a regular pot luck! A calf was set aside at birth, given special treatment and special food, and saved for that very special occasion when the fatted calf would be butchered and served. The father said, "Nothing is more special than the return of my son, my son who was lost and now is found."

There was music and dancing at the party. Yes, there is music and dancing in heaven. Where did we get the idea in the church that dancing was evil? When you know God's love who can quench the music, the dancing, the joy. That's how church gatherings should be, times of joy and dancing. That is salvation!

Let's look more closely at this parable. Let's look at the cast of characters. Jesus was a master story teller. This parable is filled with real people who had genuine experiences and feelings.

First, there was the younger son. He wanted his independence. He wanted his chance. At home, he was in the shadow of his elder brother. He felt constricted, restricted, confined. It was too conservative at home. He wanted his chance to do it his way, so he asked and obtained his share of the family fortune.

He flubbed it. He wanted his independence and then he flubbed it. He blew it! He mismanaged the investments. He squandered his funds on parties. Not all parties are salvation parties! And when the depression hit, he had nothing, went to work on a pig farm, and realized the pigs were better off than he.

He then came to himself. He had the honesty to look at himself. He did not like what he saw and he had the courage to repent, turn around, and go home. He had the strength to admit his defeat and go home.

He humbly went home to his father. He realized his righteousness, his stubbornness, his abilities were not good enough to make it on his own. He needed his father. He needed his home. He needed God.

The second character in the drama was the father. The father loved his two sons; no doubt equally but differently. Each son had unique needs. The younger son wanted his independence. Out of love for the younger son, the father appreciated his need to try it on his own, gave the son his money, and let him go. Love often means to let go. Even when you are sure they will make a mistake, fall, fail, and get hurt; when you love them, you let them go.

The father then took the stance, the posture of love: waiting, watching, praying. Can you see him watching out the window? Day after day. How long had he watched? Had he heard rumors about his son's failure? The father waited, watched, grieved, sorrowed, wept for his son, as does God for you.

Jesus said, "While the son was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming, and his heart filled with love." How many others did the father see in the distance, his heart leaping into his throat, and then disappointedly realize it wasn't his son. Until the day he saw a figure in the distance, recognized the walk, the tilt of the head, and recognized his son!

The father then ran to the son. He had to wait until the son took the first step. He couldn't take the first step for the son. The son had to repent, turn around and head for home. But, the father didn't have to wait until the son was all the way home. The father ran the distance to his son, with arms outstretched, embracing and kissing him. He welcomed him and threw a party, the best party he had ever given. Nothing was too good for his boy!

The third character in the drama is the elder son, the first-born, the good boy. We don't meet him in the story until the party is in progress. He returned from the fields, heard the music and dancing, and asked, "What's going on?" He was told, "Your brother has returned and your father is giving a party!"

The elder brother was angry, jealous and resentful. He said to his father, "All these years I've worked hard for you. I've done everything you've asked. I've stood by your side. Yet, in all that time, you've never given me a party! You have never killed the fatted calf for me and my friends. But you give a party for my brother who left us, ran off to leave me with all the work, and lost your money! It is not fair! It's not right!"

The elder son was righteous. He had a keen sense of what was right and what was wrong. But, his heart was filled, not with love and concern for his brother, but with jealousy and resentment. He probably had secretly gloated when he heard of his brother's misfortunes; probably put his nose in the air and snorted, "Serves him right. I told you so." And when he saw his father anguishing, praying over the younger son, he probably said, "Don't weep for him, Dad. You've got me."

But now the elder son couldn't join the party. He may have missed the salvation event for he was content with his own righteousness. He could not have a saving relationship with his father, for he did not recognize his own needs. He could not ask for forgiveness or mercy. Narrow was the door into the party. Narrow is the door into heaven, into the kingdom of God, and his proud head, stiff neck and cold heart prevented him from entering and enjoying the party.

Three characters in this parable: the younger son, the father, and the elder son. Which character are you? With whom do you identify? No doubt you see yourself in all three, but perhaps one dominates over the others.

Is there something of the younger son in you? Have you flubbed? Realized your mistakes? Have you ever acted foolishly out of a desire for independence? Have you repented of your separation from God and come home? Are you among the saved and enjoy partying with Jesus?

Or, is there something of the father in you? Can you identify with the father? Have you watched your children or friends assert themselves, make mistakes and get hurt? Have you had to let them go out of love, and then take the stance of waiting, watching, suffering, weeping?

Or, is there something of the elder son in you? A little smugness, perhaps; a feeling of superiority over those who make blunders? Is there some self-righteousness and secret rejoicing over other people's misfortunes? Based on my "vast years of experience", I suspect that most church people are tempted to act like elder sons. We have a tendency to self-righteousness.

When I went to the Manteca Church, several had been unhappy with the church. Some had dropped out; some had gone to other churches; but with the arrival of "the new minister", several returned. Most of the people were glad to welcome them back, but a few of the "loyalists" (those who had not jumped ship) were resentful of the "returnees." I heard comments such as: "Look at them come back trying to take over." "I wonder how long they'll stay this time." Elder brother kind of comments, unforgiving. When there are conflicts and crises, everyone loses. Things are said, things are done for which people are sorry. But, events cannot be replayed. Words cannot be resaid. But, are there no second chances? No forgiveness? No reconciliation?

The elder brother may have been right, just, faithful, loyal, the good boy. But, he missed out on the party. He sat on the outside, missing the fun, pouting, sulking, lonely.

Which character are you? Where are you in your relationship with God? Do you know God as Saviour? Do you know the joy of being forgiven? Are you enjoying the party?

Salvation is a party. There is such joy in heaven when a sinner comes home to God. There is such joy in heaven when the proud become humble. The gospel is a feast, a dance, rejoicing, forgiveness, reconciliation. A jamboree!

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