

We Must Celebrate

In the name of him who receives sinners and eats with them, dear friends in Christ: At the beginning of today's Gospel lesson we find the Pharisees with their noses out of joint. They are complaining that Jesus, the popular miracle-working Rabbi from Galilee, is dining with the wrong sort of people. He's feasting and celebrating with tax collectors and sinners ... well, not just any sinners: Jesus is feasting with sinners who have come to him in repentance, confessing their sins, and they have received from Jesus his pardon, peace, and forgiveness. More than that, they have received his Spirit and strength to amend their sinful lives and strive to do better in the future.

The Pharisees refuse to see that. They don't care how repentant a person is. They don't care how much they try to walk in God's paths. Once a sinner, always a sinner. Like those who suffer from leprosy, they can never be clean. There's no way in the world that any self respecting (read that: self-righteous) Pharisee would ever lower himself to dine at a table with the likes of them. They find Jesus' behavior scandalous. They're disgusted with him.

Understand that among the Jews to dine with someone – what was called table fellowship – was considered (next to marriage) to be the highest form of intimacy and personal relationship. It was because of the way they ate back then. You didn't sit at a dinner table with your own plate and silverware – not even your own cup to drink from. Instead diners reclined at a very low small table, lying very close together, and all tearing pieces from their loaves of pita bread and using them to pick up little chunks of fish or lamb from a common plate, and dipping them in single bowls of various sauces and stews. Everyone drank from the same cup. Consequently, if you invited someone to your table you were saying that they were welcomed and received as if they were full members of the family. It is beyond the Pharisees' comprehension that Jesus could communicate this level of closeness to sinners regardless of their state of repentance.

In response to their grumbling, Jesus tells three parables. Two are very short. You can see that verses 4 – 10 were skipped in the reading. They are the parables of the *Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin*. In the first, one of a shepherd's 100 sheep has wandered off, become lost, and is in danger of being killed by predators. So he leaves the 99 that are safely being protected by other shepherds and goes to find it. When he does, he lifts it to his shoulders, gladly bearing its weight, and returns home rejoicing where immediately he invites his family and friends to join him in celebrating – which would, of course, have included a meal together (that is, table fellowship).

The second parable is like it. This time it's a woman who has lost one of her ten valuable coins. It's likely part of her dowry or life savings. She needs this money. So she lights a lamp and sweeps the house until she finds it. When she does it's the same thing: she invites her friends over for a celebration. Jesus concludes both parables with the same statement. He says, even so, there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Now, the Pharisees understand that to find a lost sheep or coin is something to celebrate. And a human being made originally in the image of God is a worth infinitely more than any sheep or coin. Heaven and all the angels rejoice when a sinner comes to repentance, that is, when a lost *person* is found. Jesus' unasked but heavily implied questions to the Pharisees are these: if heaven is rejoicing over these sinners who repent, why aren't you? Whose side are you on? You should be joining me in feasting with these people. Why aren't you?

It's then that Jesus tells the parable commonly called the *Prodigal Son* – but the *Loving Father* might be a more fitting title. It's the capstone of his argument and the final nail in the coffin he's building for the Pharisees' bad attitude. The story is straight forward, but it may escape our modern ears just how awful and unthinkable are the initial behaviors of the younger son to the people of the culture Jesus first addressed these words. In asking his father to divide the inheritance, he's essentially saying to him, "You are as good as dead to me. I wish you would die; but since you haven't, give me my inheritance now. I'm out of here." It's hard to imagine anything more insulting and mean spirited for a son to say to his father.

It's incredible that the father agrees. Though the words must be like a dagger in his heart to hear from a son he loves so much, he does what his rebellious son asks. The Pharisees would be beside themselves with loathing for this son, and utterly flummoxed that the father would agree. But this father knows that he cannot command his son to love and remain with him. He's already lost him. He's here physically but his heart is far from him. The father divides the estate. His son must learn for himself the consequences of rejecting his father's love and authority.

The foolish young man then commits another outrage. He quickly liquidates his assets – which would have been mostly real estate in the Promised Land. It's been in the family for over 1400 years. God gave them this land in the days of Joshua. Around here a century farm is a big deal. Imagine wanting to sell property your family has held for almost ever. Imagine too what kind of unscrupulous person in that culture would be willing to buy it, and what a low price he would be willing to pay for it. Not only does the Prodigal foolishly sell the land, he gets gypped. And so it is with anyone of us who is willing to leave the great inheritance we have in Christ in the eternal Promised Land in order to pursue the pleasures of sin. It's like Esau selling his valuable birthright for a bowl of stewed lentils.

But the prodigal son imagines that he is finally free of his father's clinging control and can do as he pleases. Off he goes to land far away – a picture of the distance that already exists between him and his father. He lives it up without a care, squandering his wealth on vain things ... until the money runs out. I remember back in my college days seeing this happen to about a third of every incoming freshman class. They partied their time away, neglected their studies, and when Mommy and Daddy saw that first report card, they pulled the plug on what they were paying for junior's education. They ended up back at home by the second semester. The prodigal hasn't woken up yet, though. He's broke, but he has no plans to go home.

And then a famine strikes. It's amazing how much of the biblical storyline is driven by famine. It's almost like God is in control of things and brings this kind of hardship on his people to drive them back to him. Anyway, food prices skyrocket. Jobs are scarce. The younger son hires himself out to a Gentile, something that would be beneath the dignity of any Jew. Worse is that this foreigner puts him to work feeding pigs, which to Jews are unclean. And if he hasn't sunk low enough, the prodigal son now longs to fill his empty, aching belly with the pods the pigs eat, from which they can derive a little nourishment but are indigestible to humans. The young man has hit rock bottom.

Only then does he come to his senses. Only then does he see what a fool he's been – and how much he wronged his father. "My father's hired hands have plenty to eat, and here I am starving to death. I'll return home and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired hands.'" It sounds like a reasonable solution; but in planning to work for his bread as a hired hand, the prodigal is actually trying to retain for himself some shred of dignity. It's a plan the Pharisees would heartily approve of. Hired hands aren't welcome at the master's table. They eat with the servants. They

have a lot to prove, a lot to make up for, and they will never be fit company for table fellowship with a person of worth.

The loving father sees things differently. While the returning prodigal is still only a silhouette on the distant horizon, the father sees and recognizes him. He knows that peculiar gait and has long stood searching the skyline hoping to see it again. Joy and compassion fill his heart. Rather than wait for the young man to come crawling to him with his tail between his legs, the father runs to meet him. The prodigal has been expecting a thorough scolding – which he knows he deserves. But again, it's not what happens. Before he can get a word out of his mouth, his father throws his loving arms around him and gives him a kiss of peace and full welcome.

The young man begins to stammer his confession of sin and how he's not worthy to be called his father's son. He doesn't say the second part though about being taken on as a hired hand. Some think this is because his father cuts him off before he can get to it; but that's not it. No, the youth is simply overwhelmed by his father's grace and forgiveness. He's been embraced. He's been kissed. He knows his father is receiving him back as a son. As far as the father is concerned, all is forgiven and forgotten.

The prodigal knows this, but the father needs to announce it to the community at large so that everyone else knows it too. So he orders his servants to bring the best robe in the house to show the world that the father is honoring his son. It's also a picture of how the repentant are clothed in the most glorious robe of all: the robe of Christ's righteousness. He's to have a ring on his hand. This is the signet ring of the family giving him the authority to do business in his father's name. And he is to have shoes for his feet which were the mark of a free man, not a servant.

Lastly the father orders a feast to be laid on. Slaughter the grain fed calf, the one kept for special celebrations like this. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and now is found." The celebration begins. A good time is being had by all.

Well, not by all. The older son is returning from his work in the field. He is no doubt a supervisor not a common laborer. As he approaches the house he hears music and dancing and laughter. He wonders what in the world is going on. He's confused especially because as the eldest son, he should be the master of ceremonies for a celebration like this, allowing his father the freedom to greet and mingle with guests. He asks a passing servant who explains, "Your brother has come home. Your father has killed the fatted calf. He's filled with joy because his son has returned to him safe and sound."

It's good news; the best news, but the elder son refuses to see it that way. He's filled with fury and resentment. He's not about to join in this celebration. (Anyone care to guess who's the Pharisee in this story?) Because he won't go into the feast, the father comes out to reason with him. He wants his son to see what a tremendous thing this is. And now it's the elder son who shows disrespect and contempt for his father. He complains about how he's faithfully served his father (like a hired hand) and never received any proper appreciation. He contrasts this with his father's treatment of his younger brother – and accuses him of sins that he can't possibly know about. He simply assumes the worst must be true.

But despite this show of contempt, the father continues to plead. Don't you see? *We must* celebrate. *We must* feast together at the table. For your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.

Part of the genius of this parable is that it's left hanging. Does the older brother go in as the father desires? Or does he stay outside of his father's house fuming in self-righteous indignation?

It's Jesus' invitation to the Pharisees to join him in feasting and celebrating with repentant sinners who have come home. Like the loving father, he's entreating them. And if they stay outside the father's house, what does that say of them? Who is the lost son now? Which of them is dead?

These are important questions for us as well. It's easy as Christians to identify ourselves with the prodigal son, for we know that daily we sin much against our heavenly Father and we rely on his forgiving embrace when we return to him in repentance. What's much harder to see in ourselves is the elder brother – but he's there. There is a Pharisee lurking in all of us. This is the part of you that judges other sinners to be worse than you are. Their sins for some reason can't be forgiven as easily or as completely as your own. No, somehow they have to prove themselves worthy first. They have a lot to make up for. Payment of some kind is due. And even if they pay it they can't be fully welcomed back to the family table.

The feeling that payment is due is quite correct. It was for your sins too. And it's a debt you could never pay. Only Christ could pay that debt for you by his suffering and death on the cross. And he did. If you receive Christ's forgiveness for yourself, you must see that other repentant sinners receive it also. And you must embrace them as your brothers and sisters in Christ. To do less is to deny Christ's saving work on the cross. It's this attitude that there are still dues to be paid that gave the medieval church the damnable, satanic doctrine of Purgatory – an imagined place where sinners pay their outstanding dues because Jesus didn't manage to do it all; that when he said "It is finished", he only meant "Well, mostly finished kind of sort of."

No, Jesus paid the full debt for all sins, yours and everyone else's too. And so when you see that elder brother in yourself, begrudging others the same free forgiveness you're receiving, you need to recognize it for the sin that it is and repent. When you do, there will be rejoicing in heaven over a sinner come home – as there should be rejoicing here among the saints on earth as well for we must celebrate when the dead come to life and the lost are found. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!