

It's Time For a Party: A Sinner Comes Home

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October 25, 2020

Luke 15:10-24

*“Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

*Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 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. 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. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ 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. 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.’ 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:10-24 (NRSV)*

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, I pray that your spirit would fill us up, that it would soften our hearts for what it is that you want us to hear, and that it would move us out to be a part of your kingdom. We pray this in your name, Amen.*

So Tony Campolo is a guy who was a pastor for a while, but he spent most of his career as a sociology professor at Eastern University. He used to get to be asked to speak all over the country, and so he would fly back and forth to conferences. He tells a story about one time he had gone to Hawaii to speak to at a conference. So, he leaves from Pennsylvania, and he lands in Hawaii, and by 3 a.m., he is wide awake, starving, and ready for breakfast because he thinks it's mid-morning his time. So, he gets up and he's walking the streets of Honolulu looking for something to eat, and everything is closed. He finally ends up in this diner that is like a greasy spoon type of diner. He sits there and has his breakfast, and after a few minutes, this group of prostitutes walks in. They're loud, boisterous, and they're all talking, teasing one another. Then one of them says, "Hey, you know, tomorrow's my birthday." And the rest of them are thinking, "Who cares?" One of them says, "Do you want us to throw you a party?" And the first one says, "Well, no, no one's ever thrown me a party before. I didn't expect you'd do it I just wanted to tell you."

Then they left. Tony got to talking to the diner owner, and he found out that they came in every night, so he put a plan together. The next morning at 2:30 a.m., he shows up in this same diner; he has crepe paper to decorate the place, the diner owner makes a cake. Then when the prostitutes come in at 3 a.m., they are in shock. They're in awe because no one has ever done anything like this for them before. In fact, the one whose birthday it is takes the cake after they've blown out the candles. And she says, "Do you mind if we don't cut this? Do you mind if I take it home with me? I've never had my own birthday cake before?"

As the party is winding down, Tony says, "Hey, let me offer a prayer over all of you." The diner owner is suddenly indignant, and he says, "Hey, you never told me you were one of those Jesus people? I didn't know you were a pastor. What type of church do you belong to?"

Then Tony replied, "I belong to the type of church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3 a.m." Then the diner owner thinks about it for a bit, and he says, "No, you don't. Such a church doesn't exist. If that church existed, I'd want to be a part of that church."

Wouldn't we all want to be a part of that church – of a church that is so radical in its inclusion and love and celebration? One of my favorite authors is Rachel Held Evans, who

passed away last year, far too soon. She wrote a book called *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church*. And in there, she talks about taking the Eucharist on Sunday mornings and what a celebration that is. She writes: “On a given Sunday morning, I might spot six or seven people who have wronged or hurt me. People whose politics or theology or personalities drive me crazy. The church is positively crawling with people who don’t deserve to be there - starting with me.

“The church is God saying, ‘I’m throwing a banquet, and all of these mismatched, messed up people are invited. Here, have some wine.’”

The picture we get from reading the Gospels is of a God that loves parties and celebrating. Jesus talks about parties in his parables; he has dinner parties and banquets with people who are considered less than savory. In fact, that’s something the Pharisees get really angry about. Jesus’ first miracle happens at a wedding and at the wedding reception, at the party, he turns water into wine. God loves parties.

We’re going to talk for the next few weeks about parties, about the Jubilee and the year that everything is a celebration, is made right, and when everything is turned over and started fresh. We’ll talk about the Feast of the Tabernacle and how the people celebrated God, bringing them through the wilderness. We’re going to talk about the Eschaton and when God makes everything right in the end at a marriage banquet at a big party where everyone has enough to eat and drink, and no one goes hungry or thirsty. And on November 15, we’re going to talk about the celebration that happened when David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, and they had a big festival to thank God for everything that God had done for them in the past. And that will be the day we celebrate St. Luke’s seventy-fifth Anniversary as we thank God for everything God has done for us.

Today we’re going to start off by talking about a party that I’m guessing you’re all pretty familiar with. At the beginning of Chapter 15 there are a few verses that we didn’t read today, but it really sets the stage for this. The Pharisees come to Jesus and say, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” And they are upset. Their insinuation is that if Jesus is such a partier, then what kind of savior can he be? What kind of a savior is a man who parties with sinners? So, Jesus tells them these stories. One of them is this one about the Prodigal Son, and it’s to demonstrate who he wants to be with, who he wants to celebrate with, and who is welcome at his celebration.

There's a story about a man who has two sons. The younger son comes to him, and he says, "I want what's coming to me. I want to get out of this town. I'm tired of being here, and I want what's mine." There are a couple of things here I want to point out. One of them is that he would be given a third of his father's estate according to the Deuteronomical law that says that younger sons get a third of the estate, but he wouldn't get it until his father passed away. It's not like it's just a pile of cash that's sitting there. It isn't a trust fund that he has access to, and his father can maybe liquidate some stocks and give it to them. This is property. So his father would have to sell a third of his property, his income-generating property, and give it to that son. That would be an embarrassment for the father among his neighbors. And since the son isn't supposed to get it until his father is dead, he might as well go up to his dad and say, "I wish you were dead." That's what he's saying when he says, "Give this to me now."

So he takes it and runs off to some first-century Las Vegas, he squanders it all, and he finds himself in peril because he's hungry and he doesn't have enough to eat, and there's a famine in the land. He takes a job that actually separates him, even further from his family's roots or from his religion, because all of sudden, he's having to deal with pigs.

The Scripture says in verse 17: "He came to himself." He remembered something, and he came back to himself. He didn't know exactly how he'd gotten there, but he knew that where he was and who he was are two different things.

What I think is really important for us to recognize is what triggers him for coming to himself isn't recognition of his own sin; it's not remorse for how he is. It's his memory of his father's love. The Scripture says that he remembered that his father fed his hired hands; he remembered the grace and love that were poured out by his father to everyone. And it brings him back to himself. He's motivated not by shame but by love.

Whitney and I are doing this parenting Bible study right now with a number of other parents at St. Luke's, and we've been talking about our kids' behavior. And how we can effect changes in their behavior and how we move them in certain directions. Also, how we respond to them. One of the things that keeps coming up is our kids respond more to love than to shame. Our kids don't respond to us making them feel badly about what they're doing-especially not at the age my daughter is. She responds to my love. That's what this son remembers here that his father's love is wide and merciful. And that's what brings him back to himself.

The son sets off, and he heads home, and when he's still far away, the Scripture says, "The father sees him and runs out to meet him." There's this picture of the father who is waiting and watching to see his son. He's looking out at the horizon every day because he wants to know if his son is coming back. And when he is, he runs out to meet him.

This is a little part of a verse that we might miss, but I think it's important to note. This is not something a Palestinian man would have done, especially not a man of this standing. People run to him – he does not run to people. But the father doesn't act normally because here Jesus is giving us a picture of a God who doesn't act normally. Of a God that embraces us and runs out to us and is wooing us even when we are so far away.

And it's not just in the welcoming when he runs that he represents God. It's also in the free will that the father has given the son. This is a picture of the way God is with us. God doesn't want us to run off. The father didn't want the son to run off. The father didn't want the son to squander everything he had. But he knew that if he kept him there, if he said to him, "I'm not going to give you your inheritance. You have to stay here." Or he might have said, "I'm not going to give you your inheritance – you can go, but you're going to be in trouble." That wouldn't create a relationship with him. It's not the basis of a relationship. The fact that the son had a choice is the basis of a relationship.

That's what God does for us. God gives us that choice that free will. God hopes that we don't run off. But when we do, God is there waiting on us—waiting to welcome back into the fold.

As soon as the son gets back, the father says to his hired hands, "Let's have a party. My son was once lost, and now he's found. It's time for us to have a celebration."

I want you to try and imagine how joyful that moment might have been. About a month ago, there was a brother and sister who were in the Philippines playing near their house, and the little sister heard what she thought were some children calling out. So the brother and sister go a bit further into the growth by their house, and they're looking for what the little sister had heard. They come upon this pit, and it's about three feet deep. And in the pit, they find a baby goat, and it's just bleating and crying out for its mother to get out of the pit. So they rescue the goat, bring it to their house and feed it milk out of a bottle. Then they go to all their neighbors and ask if this was their goat. No one claims the goat, so they keep it overnight. And the next morning, they go a bit further out in their village, and they're looking to the family that might own the goat. Then

all of a sudden, they come to a clearing, and they see a herd of goats with the exact same markings as the baby they found. Take a look and see what happens.

What I love about that is that you don't just hear the baby goat and the mother goat kind of crying out for each other, you hear all the goats bleating and being loud, and it's a reminder of what a celebration it is. The baby was lost and is now found, and it's a cause of celebration among all the goats.

Some of us probably know that feeling really intimately. Some of us have probably had relationships that have been broken or lost. Whether it's through time or through a falling out or some other situation, and when they're restored, we want to come right back into that relationship. We want to go right back into the restored relationship. We don't want to spend time on what went wrong or spend time reprimanding one another. We're just so grateful that that person is back in our lives.

Ken Bailey is a theologian who spent a lot of his career in the Middle East, and he wrote in a book about this parable. He said: "This story is where we meet a God who is more concerned about restoring relationships than reprimanding for broken commandments. Jesus shows us a God who desires reconciliation more than a good reputation."

So often, we think of God as the eternally disappointed one. The one who's always angry for us for our sin and for our behavior. And our own attitudes reflect that. The older brother in this story says basically, "Is it really right to throw a party for a prodigal?" And that's how we often think of God. Are we really worthy of having a party thrown for us?

There's a hymn I suspect many of you know, and it's called "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." It's based on a poem, and not all of the stanzas of the poem made it into the hymnal, but there's one stanza I want to read to you that I think perfectly encapsulates our human tendencies. It goes like this:

*"But we make His love too narrow  
By false limits of our own;  
And we magnify God's strictness  
With a zeal God will not own."*

When he is faced with sinners, Jesus doesn't rebuke them; Jesus brings them into the party. He says, "You are worthy." Jesus' love is what causes us to live in a way that is more reflective of God's law. It's not Jesus' shame. This is what grace is. This is a scandalous grace. It's hard

for us to recognize because this isn't the type of grace that we would naturally extend to others. This is a grace that says, "Everyone is welcome. Everyone is worthy. There's enough to go around and we want all of you here.'

We would be inclined to say, "Welcome home. I'm glad you're back. Let's talk about what you did. You're going to have to earn your way back into this family. It's probably going to take a while." And God says, "Get the fatted calf!" And here is a robe – not just *a* robe – the best robe and here is my ring that gives you full privileges of being a part of my family. I am so glad you're home. "

We call this story the Prodigal Son because prodigal means extravagant – almost bordering on wasteful. And that describes the son's behavior. But it also describes God's behavior. It describes the father's behavior extending so much mercy.

There is nothing that we can do that God can't outmatch us in mercy. There's no mess-up we can make, no sin that God doesn't have greater love than that we are brought into the fold. This story ultimately is not about God's prodigal children. It's about God's prodigal love. God's extravagant love for us that says, "You are all welcome here." And that's a party. And that's worth celebrating.

I read this week about a village in Pakistan that has an unusual tradition surrounding baptisms. The first time someone in that village was baptized as a Christian, he went into the water, then he came out of the water, and he shouted, "Hallelujah!" And the missionary that had shared Christ with him ran up to him, they embraced, and they jumped for joy. They danced, and they sang, and it was such a celebration. Everyone around them, all the onlookers thought, "I guess this is what happens at Christian baptisms!" Then as more and more people came to know Jesus and decided to follow him, and they gave their lives to Christ and were baptized, they'd have the baptisms, and they'd all end with the person coming out of the water screaming "Hallelujah!" Then there'd be a party and a celebration, and it grew. Now every baptism that happens in that village has a celebration that goes along with it.

A celebration that causes people to look and wonder, "Who is this God who is so wonderful and loving and merciful that these people are that excited?"

Let's pray together. *God, we love to party, and we are so grateful that you invited us to yours. We are grateful that you have set a place for us, made space for us, that you're wooing us to you. God, we pray that your love and mercy that we experience, that we might go out and share that with others so they can be a part of your celebration as well. We pray all of this in Christ's name, Amen.*