

July 3

A Call to Celebration

Luke 15:11-32

Today we end our series on the Prodigal Son. The last person to talk about is the older brother. The story ends with a focus on him. He comes in from the field, hears the noise of the party, finds out that his brother has returned and his father has killed the fatted calf. He is upset and the father leaves the party to invite him in. It is interesting to note the changing verb tenses in this last bit of dialogue. The older son refers to the Prodigal as “this son of yours.” He does not want to be identified with him in any way. He lists all the things he had done wrong. He wants accountability and, for him, that means condemnation and punishment. He would have gladly had him become a slave and, boy, would he have had work for him to do!! He also shares his grievances with the father, how he never had a party thrown for him! The father responds by saying “your brother.” He reminds him that they are in a relationship no matter what he has done. He shares the reasons why they are celebrating. We leave the brother standing outside. The father, we assume, returns to the party. Does the older brother go in?

Jesus leaves it open ended. Jesus has this encounter between father and older brother as the end of the story. Have you ever thought about that? It could have ended with the prodigal returning, the fatted calf being slain and all attending the party. But he continues and I think this last part is really for us, the faithful who try to live a good life, a faithful life, and do what God wants. Yes, there will be the prodigals and we are glad God forgives them, but what are we being challenged to hear?

The exchange between the father and his older son reminds us that we are in relationship with all people, not just the ones like us. Unfortunately there has always been a bit of “us and them” when it comes to faith. The people of Israel took pride in the fact that they were called into a special relationship with God. What they forgot is that through this relationship they were to be a blessing to all. Instead they began to see themselves as separate, better, and more loved than all others. The Pharisees began as a movement to reform Judaism and was based on learning and faithfulness to God. It became an exclusive group that often looked down on others as sinners who were

cursed by God. Even to this day we have in the church “us and them” thinking. This happens most when people divide on social or theological lines. We want to believe that there is some special place for us in God’s heart because we are faithful. We understand all are God’s children but we are the beloved. There is a post running around social media. It says, “Jesus or God loves you but I am his favorite.” Jesus reminds us that we are all loved by God but even more, that there is no favorite child status. We are all in relationship with one another. Yes, the good one who never did anything wrong is still the brother of the notorious sinner. You may want to distance yourself but God says instead we are to figure out how to be in a loving relationship! That is the challenge of our faith.

The second lesson I hear the father trying to teach the older son is that valuing the actions of one does not devalue another. Because the father killed the fatted calf for the prodigal, the older son was now upset with life. He now whines that he never was given as much as a kid goat so he could have a party with his friends. My reading of the story doesn’t make it sound as if he was bringing up a long festering wound that the father’s actions had re-opened. It wasn’t that he had been asking for a kid goat for a party and been told no all this time. If that was the case then the actions of the father would be unkind and cruel and this is not our understanding of God. In seeing the joy and celebration for the younger, all of a sudden he felt unappreciated. The father should have done something for him! Since he had never been given a kid goat it must mean the father doesn’t appreciate all of his hard work. Dad doesn’t love me as much as my brother!

This is not the only time Jesus brings up the issue of how comparison warps our view. Remember the story of the workers in the vineyard. The first ones hired were told they would get the standard daily wage for their day’s work. They were excited to get the job. Then others were hired throughout the day. In the end the owner of the vineyard knowing all needed that daily amount of money to buy bread for their families was generous and gave all of them the same amount. Now those who had agreed to the original terms were angry because they saw themselves as devalued. They had worked

long and hard and were treated the same. This again is a story about kindness, relationships and not about comparison.

This is an issue we struggle with. I don't know how many times I have had conversations in church where we have wanted to recognize someone who has really gone the second mile. Invariably I hear, but if we say thank you to them then someone else will have their feelings hurt. We compare ourselves to others. We tend to determine our self-worth by how we are treated in relationship to others.

Jesus, in the story, wants us to see that there are blessings enough for all of us. There is more than enough love to go around. The older brother is invited into the party. There is a call from God to celebrate! It is his issues that keep him on the outside.

The cautionary part of this tale is that the older brother is not seeing the benefits of home. The prodigal ran away from all of this and has paid a heavy price for his rebellion. He now values home in a way that he never had before. The older brother, the good one, has enjoyed home until now. Part of the reason he is still there is because he loved being there and felt productive and appreciated and all the rest. It was only when he began to compare that he got into trouble. He began to doubt the father or God's love for him. Whether we realize it or not, he has begun his own prodigal journey. He has taken his first step away from God. In rejecting the prodigal as his brother, in challenging the father as to his love, he has turned from home.

This is why Jesus ends the story here. Since we are here today we have to decide what we are going to do. Brian McLaren says the faithful life in the end is a call to us, from God, to join the celebration. To enter into that party means embracing the sinner, being willing to celebrate what is happening for them instead of comparing, and ultimately realizing that it doesn't matter who the party is thrown for, you are invited and there is plenty of blessing and joy to go around. Until he enters the party the faithful older son has become the prodigal with his own need to turn and head home, to a home radically different than he had expected but home never-the-less.

We are afraid that he will stay outside nursing his hurt feelings. If so, what a tragedy for him and for his father. But just think about what would happen if he went into

the party, embraced his brother and said and meant, "Welcome home!" The celebration would have expanded to include both of them. The father would have been overjoyed that both of his sons were home and together. All would see the joy of the father and the younger brother would also be filled with love for his gracious older brother. He would not have entered the party to receive the praise of others for his forgiveness but it would occur. Mostly, he would find that deep sense of community as he embraced the prodigal, not as your son but as my brother.

In closing let me share two vignettes. They represent both possible responses. I was a member of a service organization. We held a fund raiser where everything went wrong. The chair of the committee worked long hours and pulled success out of disaster. The week afterwards someone in the group moved to be placed in the minutes the heartfelt thanks of the group for all he had done. It was passed almost unanimously. One person at the end of the table was visibly angry. After the meeting he announced to several of us that he was not coming back. He informed everyone of how he had run various fund raisers and because of his hard work and careful planning they had all been successful. He had never been thanked officially in the minutes. To thank someone for a badly managed event, well you could take your club, and he left. He finally came back to meetings but after much massaging of his ego was done by all.

The other time was at church. The individual who had been the major cheerleader and organizer of a church fundraiser had to step back because of health. Another took her place and brought some new and fresh ideas. One day during coffee hour I heard several people praising the new person and all of her work. I realized the former chair was within earshot. I wondered how she would take this praise being heaped on another. Later I asked her about it and her response was wonderful. She said, "I don't care who gets thanked as long as the work gets done." She saw the mission as key. She realized that there had been times in the past where she had been thanked. She understood it wasn't a competition. She was in relationship and it was good.

So we are called to celebrate. Will you enter the party?