

“It’s a party and you are invited”

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Readings:

Luke 15:1-32

This morning’s text of the prodigal son is one of the foundational stories of our Christian faith.

It speaks to us throughout our lives as Christians, and is one of the stories we need to keep coming back to time and again.

I believe that we are always in danger of getting the gospel wrong – this text is one of the touch stones that helps us keep us out of the ditches – and holding to the gospel – the good news that Jesus came to bring us.

When we are saved by God through Jesus Christ, there are two ditches we can stray into.

We can either become legalists or we can give ourselves over to license.

Jesus’ parable of the two sons and their father, helps us stay out of both ditches.

Some of you resonate with the younger son – the one who said to his father “you’re dead to me” give

me my inheritance and let me out of this dump –
I'm going to live it up – live on my own terms.

And so off he went – and in the midst of doing
things all his own way- living life on his own his own
terms he found only death.

Partying, carousing, prostitutes, leads one way – to
emptiness, loneliness, poverty and death.

Check out the life paths of our greatest stars and
idols.

The young man comes to his senses slopping pigs
and wishing he could devour the pigs' food.

There is no lower point for a young Jewish man.

And so he dragged himself back to towards his
father's house.

The father lavishes him with gifts of love and
forgiveness.

Some of you know the power and love and great
forgiveness of the loving Father, that is so
undeserved, unexpected, out of joint with all that
should be.

You have sung with heart and soul and voice –
amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a
wretch like me.

You know that home coming, and the joy, and you have fallen down in awe before this holy and joyful mystery.

Part of the amazing message about this text is that the real party, the life-giving party, that is true celebration, that is joyous and freeing, and blessing, and is true freedom, is the party that goes on in the Father's house.

The son left home thinking that there was something more, something better, that living in his Father's house was cramping his style, the action, the party, life is what was happening someplace else.

And what he found after he left his Father's house was death, he was impoverished in every way. His friends abandoned him when the money ran out, he had no help, and no hope until he turned towards home, and his Father.

For any or all of us who have turned away from our heavenly Father, all you have to turn around and turn towards home.

Our heavenly Father awaits with open arms of forgiveness.

But our parable isn't over – and that's only one ditch.

The other ditch is the legalist one.

This is the ditch that more Presbyterians fall into – and it's the one that is more common when you've been in the church a while.

It's the one that the religious authorities fell into.

When the son came home, the old man didn't do what any other father under heaven would have been inclined to do. He doesn't say he hopes he has learned his lesson or I told you so.

The father doesn't demand a change.

What's to prevent the boy from making the same kind of foolish mistake again?

Where are the rules to keep him under control now?

Where are the consequences for his foolishness?

You can't just forgive him, and let it all go (can you?)

But that is exactly what the father in the story does. He loves the son, and throws him a party and lavishes his joy and pleasure of his return upon him.

Most of us want something more – some condition – some sign that the son has changed.

But in this homecoming of a story, we find the unexpected -- a party for the ne'er-do-well son. Our

question often echoes the question of the older brother: "Is it fitting to throw a party for a prodigal?"

Frederick Beuchner shares a wonderful insight about this story:

Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the Gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all

Heard as a joke - high and unbidden and ringing with laughter - it can only be God's thing.

And if it is a joke about the preposterousness of God, it is also a joke about the preposterousness of man as the sequel to the parable exemplifies. The word sin is somehow too grand a word to apply to the reaction of the prodigal's elder brother when the sound of the hoedown reaches him out in the pasture among the cow flops, and yet in another way it is just the right word because nowhere is the deadliness of all seven of the deadly sins deadlier or more ludicrous than it is in him.

He is a caricature of all that is joyless and petty and self-serving about all of us. The joke of it is that of course his father loves him even so, and has always loved him and will always love him, only the elder brother never noticed it because it was never love he was bucking for but only his due. The fatted calf, the best Scotch, the hoedown could all have been his, too, any time he asked for them except that he

never thought to ask for them because he was too busy trying cheerlessly and religiously to earn them. So for all of us older brothers who have been working in our Father's house, trying to do what is right, notice that the Father goes out to the older son just like he went to the younger.

The Father tells the older son, "Everything I have is yours".

It is his not because he worked for it or earned it, and it's not because he tried to the right things. Everything the Father has is his but because he is a beloved son of the Father too.

The older son's invited to the party too, he is included in the love and joy of Father.

Blessed is the prodigal, the younger son who finally learns that the real party is at his father's house, who goes home, and goes in.

And blessed is the older son, we hope. For the party could be all his also, all he had to do was go in and join the celebrations.

This is the wondrous good news of the gospel. The great party that we are all invited to join. All **we** have to do is go in and join the celebrations. Thanks be to God.