

The Prodigal Son
Deuteronomy 8:6-10 and Luke 15:11-32
Clarence Presbyterian Church
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Some years ago, I was at a teaching conference for pastors, and heard a legendary, now deceased preacher. His name was Fred Craddock. He began his lecture by recalling the number of times he had preached this parable of the Prodigal Son. Early in his career, he said, he preached it 16 nights in a row at a revival. He said he kicked that older brother around the room every night. One time, he said, he began reading the text, "Once there was a man who had two sons" and from the back he heard someone call out – "That must have made all the medical books!"

He told about another time later in his ministry when he got a call early one Sunday morning. "Good morning, Preacher. Would you come and lead our bible study?" "Well I'd like to help out if I can," he said. "When?" "This morning." "This morning? What time?" "10:00." "Well, it's 9:00 now." "Yes, sir, and we have bible study at 10:00." "Well alright then," he agreed. But on the way over, as he tells it, he got angry with them and decided to punish them. So instead of reading the story of the Prodigal son, he recited it. And he told it this way. Listen.

"Once there was a man who had two sons, and one asked for his inheritance early and went off to a far country and spent every single penny on dissolute living and then found himself working in the fields, hungry and feeding pigs.

So he woke up and decided to go home, apologize to his father and ask for a job. And that's what he did. But as he got close to home, he heard music and dancing and asked one of the servants what was going on. "Oh, your father killed the fatted calf. He's having a party to celebrate your older brother." There was a moment of silence in the bible study, and then one woman narrowed her eyes and said, "That's how it should have been."¹

"That's how it should have been." When I hear this story, I sometimes want to say that too. I feel downright sorry for the older brother. Hasn't he done everything right? He holds up his end of things. He pays his taxes, saves for the children's college and contributes to the United Way; his stewardship pledge is notable; he even pays his per capita. His wife is on the prayer chain and takes casseroles to the grieving and is raising lovely children. She has served on the PTA, and they've each taken a turn down at the Habitat House.

Perhaps there are some of us here this morning who relate best to the prodigal son. If so, you are probably giving thanks right now for the welcome you received when you headed down the road back home.

But my guess is that there are a lot more of us older brothers or sisters here today than prodigals. If we are the eldest in the family – literally or not – we understand duty, honor, the importance of rules and how things are supposed to be. There are a lot of expectations placed on us. We are role models; we set the standards – and they are high.

And just between us, we didn't necessarily welcome that younger brother when Mom brought him home. He has always had it easier than we have. It's for certain that we have always had more chores, worked like slaves, in fact. And no one seems to appreciate us much. Finally, let's get this straight. While I'm glad enough that that brother of mine is back –did we have to have a party? What if everyone ran off and misspent their future? Where's the justice in that? So the way I see it, we have every right to fume: "That's how it should have been."

Except that when you counting carbs and not blessings, when you'd rather be right than reconciled, when you are more grumbly than grateful – more about justice than mercy; when you are so focused on what you are doing and what he is getting that you forget to notice what God is doing, then, then, you too are squandering your life, what poet Mary Oliver describes as our one wild and precious life.

And that is the definition of prodigal – one who is reckless, wasteful, and squandering. How much easier it is for us to see it in the younger brother than the elder. After all, he asked for his inheritance early, which may have been permitted, but certainly embarrassed his father and separated him from his home and family. Once far away, he fritters away his birthright and ends up in a field with pigs, hungry and ashamed.

Completely down and out, he has a moment of clarity. He comes to himself and remembers who he is and whose he is and turns his face towards home. It will be good enough to live as a servant. Whether he returns genuinely repentant or just relieved to be fed isn't clear. It doesn't seem to matter one iota to the Father who spies him far off down the road, is filled with compassion and runs up to embrace him, which, by the way, would be pretty unseemly in the ancient world. Before the son can finish his apology, he's robed and sandaled and welcomed home as a son.

There once was a man who had two sons. The elder son refuses to join the celebration. The Father leaves the festivities, abandons his guests to go out and greet him too. His son is angry, envious, entitled. Working, working, working, he sees himself as a servant, slaving and unrewarded. He, you see, is separated psychologically from the Father, even if physically home. He has been offered everything, especially the Father's good company. Where is his gratitude? So caught up in his resentment, it's nowhere to be found.

What he seems to be missing – and for all the times I've heard and read this parable, I have missed it, too. He's missing the celebration. The word celebrate is used 3 times. "We had to celebrate," says the Father, as if there can be no other response to a homecoming.

Celebrate, of course, means to gladden, rejoice, be merry and delighted. In God's kingdom, celebration is a way of being and living. "The Christian should be a celebration from head to foot," said St. Augustine. Or as my 94 year old friend says. "Every day is a celebration when you are 94." I'm coming to see how important celebrating is for Christians. Why? I'd like to suggest 3 reasons.

First, celebrating keeps us from being too earnest, too churchy, or too stuffy. Celebration brings us new energy as we look up from the grindstone and put down our labor. From this

perspective we can pay more attention to the goodness of God and remember to say thank you for all we have been given. If you didn't always have a celebratory spirit here at Clarence, you may have learned it from Greg. I know I have. "Have fun," he always says to me. "Have fun."

It is hard to be sulking and resentful when you are having fun and steeped in gratitude. Knowing we are dependent on God for all that we have softens our judgments and our sense of importance. Celebrating brings us joy and makes us better followers of Jesus who refreshed himself with wedding feasts, shared meals, a bit of wine, good conversations, laughter. We could throw in some dancing and singing and clapping too. Joy begets joy begets joy.

Second, celebrating strengthens the ties that bind. Think about family reunions, birthdays and anniversary and graduation parties. They create memories and elicit stories. Contrary to the old adage, absence does not make the heart grow fonder. Celebrating together does. Shared experiences fortify our identity as family and help us stick together. So too for a congregation.

You certainly know how to celebrate. I think of us in the Narthex or in the Courtyard relishing the company of our sisters and brothers -young and old. I've often thought that Upper Fellowship Hall could rightly be called Celebration Hall! There, before the mural that celebrates our history, we observe birthdays, anniversaries, confirmations, Thanksgiving - cycling through the year, one party after another. So many happy memories to savor and share.

Have you noticed the three words on the cover of our bulletin? "Growing, Serving, Celebrating" it reads, meaning this is who we aspire to be. And don't we celebrate right here in this sanctuary? Sunday worship is our weekly celebration of the liturgical year and our gracious and merciful God who created the world, gives us life, who in Christ defeated death and sin. We celebrate the sacraments of communion and baptism. And All Saints, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. How can we not celebrate the "day that the Lord has made." Of course, we rejoice and are glad in it.

Finally, says author Richard Foster, celebration is the way of Christ. He came into the world bringing good news of great joy. He left reminding his disciples that, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Now that's something to celebrate.

It's our choice. We don't know what the older brother will do. He might stand out in the field sulking with his arms folded or maybe he will "come to himself" and give thanks in everything and join the joyful celebration. I hope he does. I hope he remembers these words of Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice." So let us come to ourselves if we haven't already and join the Father in celebration. Let us be known, not only by our faithfulness but by our laughter and delight. Sinner or saint, lost or found, God is eager for us to be home— to God's family and to the shelter of his love. May we be a celebration, an alleluia, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

¹ Fred Craddock. Audio recording of sermon from Lectionary Homiletics Conference 2005.