

Will You Join the Party?

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Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

This story is about death and life. Now, I know we probably all think it's about repentance and forgiveness. That's what we learned in Sunday School and so, how we've always read it, and forgiveness and repentance have an important place in life, and in this parable, too. And we'll probably even say a word about it, but I want you to listen with new ears. This is about death and life. You see everyone in the parable ends up dead, or at least pronounced as good as dead. And the question of the parable is: will these two brothers be raised to life? Well, you remember, it starts like this: a father had two sons, and the younger one comes to his father one day and says, "Hey, Dad I want my part of what will be left to me when you kick the bucket, now." In other words he says, "I wish you were dead, but since you aren't, how about you let me treat you like you are? Could you at least act like you're dead, and give me what's coming to me?"

Now you know that had to hurt. But, the father says, "okay." And he divides his property between his two sons. Now, keep in mind that means that already the elder son has been given the larger share of the property. Now, at this point the two sons take radically divergent paths in life. You remember, the younger one takes his share of the property and heads off to a distant country, where he spends it all, wastes it all in dissolute living. We know what that means, just like the elder brother does: it means drugs, alcohol, prostitutes, fast cars and expensive clothes. Throwing it all away! How far does the younger son go away from home? So far that he's completely lost. So far that he's dead. His life isn't life at all, it's death. He ends up a complete "outsider," a stranger in a strange land.

And we all know what happens to the outsiders when things get rough for everybody, you know, like when a famine comes along? What happens is that the natural disaster triggers another crisis which makes things even worse, and that is it triggers an intense struggle over and usually hoarding of, the available resources. When that happens there will always be a victim and those who are different, are usually the chosen victims, you know, like foreigners. So, this younger son gets expelled to the utmost margins of the society. He's not just down on his luck for having spent all his money, he's deserted by everybody. In spite of all the money he's spent on his women and on his carousing friends, nobody was willing to take him in during the bad times. So, he ends up a servant who slops the hogs. His life isn't life at all, it's death.

The elder son, of course, takes a very different path. He stays back on the farm and gets up every morning and goes to work. He's mister Responsibility. And he lives every day doing just what he thinks his father wants him to do. We know all that about him, you remember, from what he says to his father there at the end of the story. But, I'll

tell you what else we know about him. Even though he had already been *given* the larger share of his father's property, he continues to live as if he has to earn everything he has, as if he has to prove he's worthy of his father's love. That's death, too. These two brothers are both in hell. They're both dead.

The two brothers represent two very common strategies we have for living life. On the one hand there's the "eat, drink, and be merry" approach. Take all the blessings of life from God and spend it on yourself. We know, don't we, that that leads to death? And, it leads to death because by using and spending all of life's blessings on yourself you are cutting yourself off from the true source of life, which is self-*giving* in nature. And the other strategy, the one of the elder son is this: take all the blessings of life from God for granted and hoard them for yourself. Because you never know what might happen, and with a little planning and hard work and keeping your nose clean you can end up better off than these other wasteful and undeserving folks who didn't think ahead. In fact, that strategy is just as deadly, and for the same reason. It doesn't really understand the generous, self-giving nature of God and so it is cut off from the true source of life. It thinks God is stingy, and like we said last week, in the business of rewards and punishments. And, in fact, these are the ones who are more likely to *stay* disconnected from the true source of life, They are the ones more likely to stand outside the party, filled with self-righteous resentment. I mean, it's not right when people are getting the benefits and blessings of life they don't deserve, at our expense, is it? At least, that's the sentiment I hear expressed over and over in the discussion about illegal immigrants.

Look at the father in this parable. He's so misunderstood by both of his sons. From the very beginning they both live by the grace of the father's substance and neither one knows it. They both think it's about getting what they deserve. It's the father who in the beginning is supporting them. It's the father who then gives them everything. From beginning to end, despite having divided his life between the two sons, the father continues to be a never-ending source of life. You see, life is eternal. Love doesn't run out. Life doesn't run out.

Now, the younger son, you remember, when life gets bad enough begins to see this about his father. He realizes how generous his father is, because he thinks "even my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare." And so he has a moment of insight, and comes up with a plan to improve his circumstances. Now, this is where we run into trouble with this story and we try to make it about the younger son's repentance. You know, if you just truly repent, God will forgive you and take you back. This is not repentance here! It's a self-interested plan to improve his circumstances in life. Listen, he says, I know what I'll do, "I'll get up and go to my father and I'll say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I'm no longer worthy to be called your son, treat me like one of your hired hands.'" (This after realizing that the hired hands have plenty to eat!)

You see, he still doesn't understand the depth of his father's love. This isn't about repentance bringing forgiveness. Keep in mind that this father has no idea what his son plans to say when he sees him coming, but when he was still far off, (while we were yet sinners) his father is filled with compassion and runs to him, throwing his arms around his neck and kissing him. And when the son begins his rehearsed speech, the father isn't listening! He doesn't care what his son plans to say. He interrupts the speech turning to his servants and calling for a celebration! The father is the same as he's always been. He's about giving himself away no matter how he's been treated. He's about life! He is life! He raises his dead son to life again, simply because he can. Simply because he has him in his arms again, where he can show him love.

And, he would do the same for both of his sons. See, the elder son, as we've said, is dead, too. He's living in a hell of his own making, the hell of hoarding, of bean-counting because he's always worried about coming out on top, about holding onto what he has. So, you remember when he comes in from the field and hears a party going on, music and dancing, his first reaction isn't to go join the party, it's suspicion! He calls the servants and says, "What's going on? I didn't commission a party!" But, his father, just like he had with the younger son, goes out to him. He pleads with him to come in and join in the celebration. You see, he would raise him back to life, too.

But, Jesus stops the parable right there. It's a freeze-frame that's stayed frozen right there for 2,000 years, so that the only question the parable poses is: will he? Will the elder son be raised back to life, too? Will he go in and join the party that the father is throwing for his "undeserving" brother? The father remains the same: a never-ending source of life. Friends, this story is about death and life. It's about how we can be raised from the dead ways we live. You see, life is grace. Period. It's not about rewards and punishments. It's not about "me." It's not about who's deserving and who's undeserving. It's pure grace, abounding love for all, to be celebrated and shared.

This parable says that God, while they're still a *long* ways off, runs out to meet, throws his arms around in love, and throws a party for all our "undeserving" brothers and sisters: drug addicts and pushers, prostitutes, welfare moms, homosexuals, homeless, illegal immigrants. And so, it's not even a question of welcoming those people. It's not even a question of finding a way to let them know that they have a home among us here in this congregation. The question Jesus poses in this parable is will we be willing to go out and join the party God is throwing for them where they are? God is active, seeking to raise the dead back into life! And if we will go and join that party of love for those "undeserving" ones, God will raise us back into life, too. The Father is pleading: "My son, my daughter, please come join the party. We have to celebrate each one simply because they're here where we can put our arms around them."

Amen.