

TITLE: "Let's Have a Party!"

Luke 15: 11-32 (NT pp. 78-79)

"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.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Introduction –

I recently read this somewhere: “If a man declares that he is able to do at 60 everything he did when he was 20 ...He wasn’t doing much when he was 20.”

A year or so after college, I was hired as a salesman for The Hope Company, which was a large industrial distributor. The first week on the job, I attended a party so I could meet the other salesmen. I watched as they all ate and drank too much, bragged about sales they had made and fantasized about what they were going to do with their commission check. To me, they were cold and condescending. My boss said that until a salesman’s commissions exceeded his salary draw, he was not in their “club”.

A while later, I was invited to a party thrown by the warehouse staff. The salesmen referred to them as “drug-crazed hippies,” but let me tell you, they KNEW how to party. I did not participate in most of the recreational activities, but the music was loud, there were people dancing, the conversations were varied interesting. Those people treated me as a friend right off the bat, no questions asked and I had a great time.

God says that the church is supposed to be a party, like the one the dad threw in the parable. The question is; What kind of party do we want”?

1. The elder son

Let’s take a look at the elder brother. He is often portrayed as a spoiled sport. He resented his brother and was angry at his father because he forgave the younger brother’s sins. The way it is usually preached, NO one would want to be the elder brother and that was another point that Jesus was making. Jesus was talking to the scribes and Pharisees and they KNEW that the older brother scenario was aimed at them. They resented the inference and we would too if it were directed at us.

But let’s take a look at this older brother for a moment. The father was a successful businessman in that society and this was the son who followed in his his footsteps. He worked hard as a child and young adult. He learned the ropes of the business, which was a large family farm. He behaved himself, he kept his nose to the grindstone, he was careful with his money. The dad was disappointed that he would not come to the party, but THIS was the son he trusted and, he said to him, “...all that is mine is yours.”

Which child are you most like? I'll bet that most of us can relate more to the OLDER son than we can to the YOUNGER. Most worked hard at school and whatever jobs we were given. We HAVE behaved ourselves, we HAVE kept our noses to the grindstone, we ARE careful with our money and we expect to receive the benefits of our hard work.

And it galls us to think that some people have SQUANDERED their lives and abilities and yet still expect benefits that WE may have to pay for. And, you see, that is one of the reasons the older son was so angry. The farm was going to be his someday, so it was HIS fatted calf that was barbequed and HIS money that paid for the band and the rest of the food for the party.

I don't know about you, but MY sympathy is with the OLDER son.

2. The younger son

Let's take a look at the younger son. Younger sons in that culture did not receive much of an inheritance. There may have been enough to start a small farm of his own, but it was by no means a share equal to his brother's. Anyway, he took his share of the inheritance, and moved to another land. Probably just as well that he left. If you are going to screw up, best not do it right under the noses of your family and family friends.

He reminds of one of the kids who went to high school with me. When he was a sophomore, he received an inheritance from his grandfather. His father advised him to invest the money, but he immediately went out and bought a brand new Pontiac Firebird convertible. I still have an image of him riding through town with the top down and three guys sitting on the cowling with their feet on the back seat. He didn't take of the car, he had several minor accidents and finally blew the engine and the car had to be junked a year or so later.

Every time I read this parable, I wonder whatever happened to the younger son. The hope is that he learned his lesson, buckled down to a job and became a responsible member of the society. But I wonder. ...But that is not the point that Jesus was making.

3. The point is saving sinners

What WAS the point Jesus making to those scribes and Pharisees and what DOES Jesus want us to learn this morning?

It is this: A person can run away from God, CHOOSE a life of sin, finally realize the error of his or her ways, repent, return to God, and God will welcome the person with open arms. This is the point Jesus was making and he often said that he had come NOT to save the righteous, but to save sinners. That what grace is. Grace in undeserved love and acceptance. As the hymn “Amazing Grace” goes:

AMAZING grace! How sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

Saving sinners was what Jesus was doing in 30 AD, saving sinners was what Jesus was doing in 110 AD, saving sinners was what Jesus was doing in 1010 AD and saving sinners is what Jesus wants us to do in 2010 AD right here in Dryden, New York.

Let me tell you a story. It’s from the book *Breathing Space* by Heidi Neumark:

The first time I visited, Angie was in her bathrobe, lying on a couch, downed by depression over her childhood when [she was abused], depression over wasted years getting high to numb the pain and doing anything to get by, depression over her HIV status. Angie sent her son to our summer program a few years ago, just to get him out of the house so she could be uninterrupted on her couch.

On the summer program application form, Angie had noted her interest in baptism for her son, the reason for my visit. We prepared for the baptism and read of the God who ...out of the great love with which he has loved us even when we were dead ...made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him.

Bit by bit Angie rose up, coming to worship, to Bible study, to volunteer at our shelter where the homeless people can eat good food and sleep in warm beds each Wednesday night. She enrolled, along with the adults from around our Synod, in a two year Christian leadership class. Angie, a highly intelligent woman, absorbed it all with growing excitement.

Everyone in class had to give a presentation on Lutheran theology, telling why they were Lutheran. One night, the students assigned to present were absent, and the pastor teaching the class asked if anyone was willing to step in. ...Angie’s paper wasn’t prepared, but she was.

Angie got a glass of water and set it in front of her. Then she slowly opened a Mary Kay jewelry case and took out a pink pouch filled with multi-colored pills. She took out about ten pills and swallowed them, one by one, in silence. The class was riveted by this unusual theological presentation.

When the last pill was swallowed, Angie stood up. "That's my HIV medication," she said. "I'm Lutheran because the church welcomed me as I am, an HIV positive, recovering addict, and child of God filled with grace. Taking care of my health is part of my stewardship. Now, by the grace of God, I want to live. I want to live for my son. I want to live for people still out there on the streets as I was. I want to live because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me. It's not just my body anymore. I'm part of his body, a temple of the Holy Spirit." Then this budding Lutheran theologian sat down.

But she doesn't sit down much. Angie rose up to become the president of our church. Often, at night, she went out and ministered to the street people she called her night flock, offering words of hope, praying, sharing scripture. She accompanied some of them to church, knowing that they'd be afraid to enter on their own. She was their door to the sanctuary. And now, Angie has stepped through the doors of Lutheran Theological seminary in Philadelphia where she is studying to be a pastor.

Older sisters and brothers don't think they need a Savior. They are wrong, but it is hard to convince them otherwise. People who have desperately messed up their lives KNOW they need a Savior.

So what am I saying? Are we all to go out and search for HIV positive drug addicts?

No. But we need to be open to the people God may bring to us who have really messed up their lives. It is those who are desperate who need to hear about our faith in Jesus. It is the kids in high school who have problems who need to be invited to the youth group. We would LIKE to invite elder sisters and brothers like us to come to church, but God says, "Bring me the lost, bring me the sick, bring me the prodigals and I will welcome them with open arms."

Conclusion - What kind of party do we want?

What kind of party do we want in our church?

I wonder what kind of party it would have been if the older brother DID get to host one. I can imagine a group of successful business people eating and drinking moderately and talking all evening about crop yields, harvesting techniques and beef prices.

Now, I'll bet that prodigal son KNEW how to party hardy.

God wants our church to be a party with prodigals AND older sisters and brothers coming together, worshiping God, having a good time and then going out and getting more prodigals to come to the party. God hopes that eventually, the former prodigals learn how to be responsible and older sisters and brothers learn how to loosen up some so we can all worship God with joy and make our community and the world a better place for all.

That is what our next hymn is about. It is #283 and Stanza 3 goes:

We are the body of which the Lord is Head,
Called to obey Him, now risen from the dead;
He wills us be a family
Diverse yet truly one:
O let us give our gifts to God,
And so shall His work on earth be done.