

Text: Luke 15: 11-32  
Title: Party  
Date: 03.31.19  
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*There was a man who had two sons....*

Just read the opening line and you know where it's going.

You know the well-worn path to moral bankruptcy and the familiar road home.  
You know the lavish love of the father, hiking up his robe and running toward his son. You know the smell of roast beef overwhelming the stink of the pigsty. You know the bean-counting-party-pooing-sour-puss-brother.

So, to the sermon-saturated this has all the bland predictability of a Bible story flannel board. But, let's back into this text by way of a different story, and maybe in the mix of parable and story we might catch a whiff of the table God has spread.

Roy Ratcliff is modest minister of modest means who serves a modest congregation in Wisconsin. Gentle of spirit, the wrinkles around his eyes and a wispy white beard hide a weary smile. Approaching retirement, after a life time of marrying and burying, baptizing and blessing, there is one baptism that stands out.

Roy was called to the state penitentiary when an inmate expressed a desire to be baptized. The inmate was blond, slender, and pallid. He confessed his guilt and knew his sin. He knew that he rightly must pay for his crimes against the state. He wanted to confess his sin before God. In Rev. Ratcliff's words, "He was seeking redemption. He was seeking forgiveness."

Several weeks later, after Bible study and church workbooks about baptism, the inmate, in a white polyester robe, climbed into a stainless-steel whirlpool that was normally used for physical therapy. The minister gently lowered him under the water and baptized him with a short prayer. When the fully immersed convict came up dripping wet, he was greeted, "Welcome to the family of God."

Hallelujah!

Get out your best suit!

Polish up a ring! Put on your dancing shoes!

Kill the fatted calf!

The prodigal son has come home!

Let the party begin!

For months after that the minister and the man met once a week to pray and study the Bible. The convict understood that forgiveness had nothing to do with the sentence he would serve; in fact, he thought he should be put to death for his crimes. Just before Thanksgiving he gave Rev. Ratcliff a card.

*Dear Roy, thank you for your friendship, and for taking the time and effort to help me understand God's word.*

A few days later the prisoner was murdered, but for many it was a death too quick and easy. For, you see, the baptized inmate was Jeffery Dahmer ~ the serial killer of 17 young men and boys.

Rev. Ratcliff presided over a discreet funeral.  
He baptized and buried the devil.

Roy Ratcliff can't shake that baptism.

Some walk away when introduced to him. They want no part of a heaven that includes Jeffery Dahmer. Some mock him for being duped. Some embrace him for his courage. Some shun him for shaming the gospel by welcoming such a sinner.

Dear friends, my intention in retelling this story is not provocation or overstepping the parameters of taste, but that it might shed light on this parable....

Is there anyone beyond the bounds of grace? Surely the prodigal son was just sowing a few wild oats. He was misguided, immature, and off on a bender, but he was no criminal. There must be hell to pay for a murderer.

Is there any son too lost?  
Is there any daughter too lost?

Consider our text....

Luke writes that Jesus tells the parable as an answer to the controversy he stirred up by keeping company with tax collectors and sinners. And, you know the story.

The son comes to the father and asks for what he has coming if his father were dead. The father acquiesces and splits what he has between the two boys. He gives the youngest the money and gives oldest the ranch. The father is as good as dead. The boy takes the money and runs; only to waste it on wine, women, and song. He squanders his life. What he thought would be the fullness of life leaves him a shell, a corpse ~ bent, busted, and broke down to his bottom dollar.

He comes to his senses in the piggery. He realizes that whatever life he had is over. And yet....

And yet he has enough life to hatch a plan. He schemes the reconstruction of a relationship. He may be dead as a son, but his father might take him back as a servant. So, with that little bit of hope he turns for home.

The father is sitting on the front-porch-rocker of his old farmstead when he sees his son coming up the road ~ a shadow of himself, threadbare, stinking to high heaven, without so much as a prayer, a dead man walking. But....

But, before he can breathe a word, before he can voice his plan, before he can say he's sorry, his father runs toward him. Without shame or hesitation, without weighing the balance or checking the books, without waiting for a confession, the father gathers the son in his arms and kisses him.

Dear friends, this isn't a cheeky comeback story about the boy who gathered up the courage to go home. This isn't a story about forgiveness in exchange for confession. This is a story of forgiveness undeserved. This is a story of finding a lost sheep, a lost coin, a dead son. Who knows how far down the road the father ran to kiss the son....

Listen to how Tom Long puts it:

*When we treat the prodigal son as a comeback story, we miss the point. When we say, "Head home, God's feast is waiting!" we misunderstand. It is not our remorse that forces God to set the banquet table; it is not our deep desire to start over again that leads God to roast the fatted calf. We cannot throw our own party. By all rights, this story ought to end with the younger son sweating in the furrows, eating in the slave quarters and spending his days serving his older brother. So, if we prodigals see the father running in our direction with open arms, we should know in our souls that this is an event so unexpected, so undeserved, so out of joint with all that life should bring us, that we fall down in awe before this joyful mystery.*

Dear friends, the son is not made alive by his confession. He is made alive simply by being a dead son. Life takes up residence in his death. Grace acts finally and fully, the relationship is restored, and life is resurrected. Let the party begin. Thanks be to God.

Of course, the other brother still thinks his life counts for something. He's still believes that "deserve" has something to do with it. He's still convinced that somebody is keeping track. And, he wants nothing to do with a party that includes his brother. Maybe his father shames the family by welcoming such a sinner, maybe the father should have been more attentive to his faithfulness. Who knows?

But, the parable ends there: with the father on the porch pleading with his son to come in for a glass of wine and a piece of bread, maybe some roast beef and a song with his brother.

And, therein lies the scandal of the gospel!

Whether you're the youngest son, or the older brother, modest minister or murderer, bean counter or broke, the only thing needed to get into the party is being dead. Grace reaches beyond the bounds of death. Our only hope is resurrection. We can wait on the porch with the brother until we die, or we can acknowledge our death and come on into the party.

Too pick up the preaching path of the last few weeks.

Even as those who hunger and traverse a wilderness, we are gathered unto God as a mother hen gathers her chicks. And under that embrace let us tell the truth of who we are, using the time that we have to bring our whole selves to the hope of Easter morn, and no matter your story, no matter the truth you tell, as you...

*see the father running in your direction with open arms, may you know in your soul that this is an event so unexpected, so undeserved, so out of joint with all that life should bring us, that you would fall down in awe before this joyful mystery.*

Come on into the party. All is forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

*Note: An essay by Thomas Long was very helpful in this writing.  
The story of Rev. Ratcliff was in the New York Times.*