

# “The Kingdom of God Is a Party”

Rev. Thom Larson

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A little over a year ago I asked the congregation to give me suggestions for sermon topics and/or Bible passages that you would like to hear me preach about. The last suggestion I received asked that I give a sermon based on the parable of The Prodigal Son. I was surprised to get that request because if there is a parable that people are familiar with, it's most likely to be this beloved parable from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. I'm guessing that most of you have heard many sermons already on this story of a wild and reckless son and his forgiving father. And I'm also ready to bet that most of the sermons you have heard based on this passage have focused on the theme of our need for repentance.

I was glad when the parable was given as our lectionary gospel reading for today because it not only gives me the opportunity to respond to the request from one of you, but it also gives me a chance to explore this parable which is so beloved and much richer in meaning, and even more challenging to our life of faith as followers

of Jesus than what you may have thought. Indeed, the parable has so much depth in it that whole books have been written about it including one by a favorite Christian author of mine, the late Henri Nouwen, who spent days pondering the parable while viewing Rembrandt's painting of the parable called the Return of the Prodigal Son. A print of the painting is here for you to see, and a detail from the painting is on our bulletin cover for today.

In order to fully appreciate the parable of the prodigal son, it is necessary for us to know who the audience was to whom Jesus first told the story. Luke gives us that information in the opening verses of chapter 15 when he tells us that tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to him, along with Pharisees and scribes who very vocally grumbled about the company that Jesus was keeping.

We, Christians, tend to have a somewhat negative view of the scribes and Pharisees. We think of them as people who were opposed to Jesus' message and ministry. Adjectives that we might use to describe them are "hypocritical" and "mean-spirited" and "rigid" and "judgmental." In fact, our attitudes toward the Pharisees and

scribes are not entirely fair. Both the scribes and the Pharisees had qualities that were admirable and very much needed in the family of God. Both groups were faithful in worship. They loved the scriptures and worked hard to apply the word to every aspect of life. They were faithful and generous givers, providing for the poor and the hungry as God's law commanded. They did their best to honor God and they urged others to do the same. They were people who were earnest, dutiful, and responsible who would be a blessing to synagogue or temple to which they belonged. In the gospels we often read about Pharisees who welcomed Jesus into their homes, who provided for his needs, and sometimes, even came to his defense against those who opposed Jesus.

But what is also evident in the gospels, especially in Luke's, is that there were many among the scribes and the Pharisees who felt that Jesus' words and behavior toward people who were sinful and irresponsible in their life choices was *dishonoring* toward God. It was okay for Jesus to dine and associate with the faithful and the respectable, but it was *not* okay for him to mix so freely with people whose lifestyles were so openly immoral. And it was

especially disturbing to see how obviously Jesus *enjoyed* taking part in their dinner parties and celebrations. Some observers remarked that maybe Jesus enjoyed partying a little more than he should, eating and drinking like a glutton and a drunkard. See chapter 7 in Luke for proof. And others thought that Jesus was soft on sin, offering forgiveness without demanding proof of proper confession and repentance first.

One particular day – when Jesus heard some of the Pharisees and the scribes muttering about the company he was keeping and saw them frowning about how accepting his was of sinners and how he *certainly* ought not to be joyously eating and drinking with them – Jesus responded by telling them some stories about how God sees sinners.

Jesus warmed them up with a story about a shepherd who never gave up looking for one lost sheep until he had found it. And after he's returned the lost lamb to the flock, his joy is so great in restoring the herd to its fullness that he calls everyone he knows to come and celebrate with him. "That's God's joy over each and every sinner that turns to him," Jesus declared. God is like that determined, celebrating shepherd.

God is also like a woman who never gives up looking for that one missing coin until she finds it, Jesus added. In great joy she calls everybody she knows to come and celebrate with her because that single lost coin was found.

Jesus then brought his point home with a story about two lost children and a parent who never gives up on them. God is *also* like that father who never stops waiting for his wayward children to come home, who in fact, in very uncharacteristic and unbecoming fashion for a dignified Oriental patriarch, *runs* to meet his sons while they are still far away. Confessions are of little importance to this father who is so eager to lavish love on his children and have his family together and at home, and who can't wait to get the party going. God's joy is like that each and every time someone turns to God. God's love for *all* God's children is deep and lavish and eternal. And when any lost child of God's finds the way home, God laughs with joy.

There's no question that the *younger* son was lost. Even before he left home, his heart was already, far, far way. Asking for his inheritance, he basically wished his father dead. And once he had left home and turned his share

into cash, he quickly wasted it all away. Famine struck and he found himself penniless and in a foreign land. He ended up in the worst imaginable place for a Jew to be, in a pigpen, feeding the most unclean of animals. He was so hungry that the pig slop started to look appetizing. And nobody would give him so much as a crust of bread. There's no doubt about it – his terrible predicament was the result of terrible choices.

But was the *older* son any less lost, any less cut off from his father? Something must have gone wrong between the father and this older boy before the big blowup over the younger sons return. Consider the situation: the older son lived right in the father's house. Every day father and son worked to keep the farm and the household going. Year after year they were there together, seeing to the herds, planting, cultivating, harvesting. They ate together at the same table.

What happened? How did the older son come to the conclusion that his father didn't appreciate him and even worse, didn't love him? What put that venom in his soul, the venom that spewed forth when he shouted, "All these years

I have worked for you – like a slave! Never once have I disobeyed you or given you a minute’s trouble. And what have you given me? Not so much as a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But when this son *of yours* comes back, this son who wasted all your property on prostitutes comes slinking home, you kill the fatted calf for him!”

What has happened to this faithful one? For some reason the older son can’t rejoice with his father at his little brother’s return. And he strikes me as someone who hasn’t done much rejoicing in a long time. I mean, when the father divided the property between the two boys, the whole farm was deeded over to the elder son. Two-thirds of everything belonging to the father was given to him, including all the fatted calves. There is absolutely nothing preventing the older son from putting together the biggest barbeque the neighborhood has ever seen. But instead of rejoicing and celebrating his father’s generosity, and his good fortune and his lavish inheritance, he grumbles and complains. Life on the farm with his father is a grim responsibility. He feels no joy. In his mind love is something to be earned and counted the same way money is. He’s a bean counter – resentful towards

anybody who gets more than their fair share. And if his father can love a good-for-nothing like his younger brother so generously and freely, then it's obvious that his father doesn't love him. So what's the use of being good anyway? What's the reward in it? Here's this dutiful son, after a lifetime of doing the right thing, yet he's just as far from his father's heart as his younger brother was in his reckless living in the foreign land. He's just as lost, even though he's technically never left home.

Which seems to be Jesus' warning to his listeners that a person can dwell in God's house for a lifetime, yet end up in that same fix. Joy starts to slip away and in creeps resentment. The life of faith becomes yet one more thing that has to be done right: *believe* the right thing, *say* the right thing, *worship* the right way, *support* the right causes. The next thing you know sincere, faithful children of God are looking at others who seem to be taking it easy, or doing something different and thinking, "Where's their sense of responsibility? Why aren't they trying to be disciples." And soon there's a touch of anger. "Don't they get it? Here we are working as hard as we can to serve the Lord and support the family of God. Don't these people care about the

rest of the church? Yet they expect the church to always be there for them?” Jesus knew how easy it is for faithful people to slip into thinking, “I’ve been dutiful and responsible. I deserve a reward. I deserve more.” Which also means we think there are others who deserve less.

In his writing about the prodigal son story, Henri Nouwen describes how he recognized the elder son in himself. He writes: *“I saw my jealousy, my anger, my touchiness, doggedness, and sullenness, and most of all my subtle self-righteousness. I saw how much of a complainer I was, and how much of my thinking and feeling was ridden with resentment.”*

Nouwen goes on to give a telling example. He describes his own anger when a friend who was a new Christian criticized Nouwen for not being prayerful enough: *The friend’s criticism made me very angry. I said to myself, ‘How dare he teach me a lesson about prayer! For years he has lived a carefree, undisciplined life, while I, since childhood have scrupulously lived the life of faith. Now he’s converted and telling me how to behave!’*

When touchiness, resentment, and complaining are welling up in our hearts, we know we are getting into the danger zone. Good people, elder brothers and sisters even, can do everything right and yet their hearts are still far away from God's heart. And being separated from God is not a good place to be. In fact it's a hellish place to be. Especially since God is waiting for us to come home.

"Son," exclaimed the father in the parable, "You are always with me and all that is mine is yours." Notice in Rembrandt's painting how the older son is already clothed in a rich robe like his father's. He already had his father's love as a gift. He is cherished by his father – always was, always will be. The father's love isn't a transaction ... it's a relationship ... a gift. But this is the bottom line for both sons. The father's arms reach longingly for both.

In his story of the prodigal son, Jesus challenges his listeners to give up "good son, bad son" thinking. He invites his audience to see that we're all in danger of wandering away from God's heart. There are times when any of us can be separated from God. But the fact is that God's love is infinite and lavish for all of

God's children. It's a "given" whatever our particular failure or shortcoming. God is determined to get all of us home, back into the embrace of his loving arms. God isn't going to rest peacefully until every one of us is at his table, at his feast. And what a great feast it is – given for one, given for all! Why, the kingdom of God is a party!

It used to be that when I heard the story of the prodigal son I focused on the younger son, on all the things I'd done wrong, on all the opportunities I'd wasted, on all the ways I'd failed to live as an obedient son. And that is a part of the story that's still important for us to hear. Then, I began to see that attitudes of self-righteousness and entitlement were just as hurtful to both myself and others as deliberate disobedience and selfish willfulness and I needed to repent of those, too. But now, I'm beginning to see that in this parable Jesus is telling me that God loves us all, no matter who we are, no matter what we've done. And we don't have to confess or repent to earn our way back into God good graces. Did you notice that the younger son repents after his father welcomes him home as his son and after all the pieces for the celebration of the son's return

have all been put into place? And the invitation to the party is an open one for the older son as well – he doesn't have to do anything except to enter the celebration that's already going on. We are simply cherished, each and every one of us. God truly wants us all to be at home in God's love. We can rest our lives on that.

So thank God for those who are faithful. And thank God for those who are attentive to duty. And thank God for those who earnestly desire to do what is right in the eyes of God. And thank God for those who generously and eagerly share their gifts with the household of God. But even more, thanks be to God for filling all our cups with love! There is enough grace for everybody. Ours is a house of lavish love and God's is a table of infinite joy. And there is a joyous party that is already underway and none of us want to miss. The kingdom of God *is* a party! Celebrate!