

Celebrate and Be Glad
March 14, 2010
Luke 15:1 – 3; 11b – 32

¹Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³Then Jesus told them this parable:

¹¹ . . . "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

This is the word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow-men throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands, this day their daily bread, and by our understanding love, give peace and joy. In the mediations of our hearts and the words of my lips, Lord, speak clearly to each of us today. In Christ Holy name, Amen!

Notice that today's reading begins in verses 1 and 2 with a statement that is seemingly unrelated to the parable that is being told in verses 11 through 32. How is it that Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners is an important segue into the parable of what many of us has come to know as the parable of the "Prodigal Son." It would be easy this morning to bypass these opening lines and speak directly from the parable itself; however, I want to draw attention to these lines for just a moment. These lines would not be present in the lectionary reading if they did not offer some matter of importance for us today. It is, however, our responsibility to seek with an open heart and an open mind the meaning of these words within the context in which they are given.

The opening lines of the text are not unfamiliar to most of us. Regardless of our level of biblical knowledge and teachings, many know that Jesus was comfortable in eating with tax collectors and sinners. I have even heard people justify their own sins by way of recounting these words from Luke 15. "I can go to the bar tonight or I can go out to the clubs because even Jesus associated with sinners." There is an eerie sense of reasoning here that I believe is far more flawed than many realize. Jesus didn't hang out with sinners because he was looking to have a good time or to witness to them through his actions.

If this was his sole purpose for engaging in community with these sinners, then I believe that Jesus, like many who have justified their presence in these places through the use of these scriptures, would have inevitably failed. Now I'm not saying that going to the club or hanging out with sinners is wrong; we are all sinners if you recall, so community with one another is always to be in the community of sinners. What I am saying is that in any situation we are in, regardless of the time or place, we must be willing to offer hope to those around us. We cannot offer hope, if we do not make that hope known and to make that hope known we must do more than just be in community . . . we must be in service to one another.

The opening words of our scripture reading today are more than just an aside; a few words in passing. They are, in short, the layout for an important issue that many communities struggle with. What are our standards and how do we respond to those who break our standards?

It was potentially ok that tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to Jesus. And why not? If they were to change their ways, they would certainly need to hear what the Lord had to say to them. Romans 10:17 reminds us that “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” All is fine and well provided that these tax collectors and sinners were willing to change their ways, to seek reconciliation and to promise to live according the accepted standards of the community in which they lived. The issue here is not that they came to hear the word, but rather that Jesus welcomed them.

Those who were in charge of policing the community’s standards grumbled because Jesus, “Welcomes sinners and eats with them.” To *welcome* sinners implies showing hospitality; playing host to them at a meal. To invite a person to a meal was an honor that implied acceptance, trust and peace.” (Malina) Our President has found himself under recent scrutiny for uninviting a former Marine Officer to a luncheon at the Whitehouse. The motivation, it seems, is that this particular Marine advocates severe disapproval for relinquishing the “Don’t ask, Don’ tell policy.” Conservatives believe that the Marine is being discriminated against for his beliefs, as if discrimination is not a common practice of our modern culture today, and that the President is in error by not supporting a law that is currently in effect.

First and foremost let me say that man’s law is not necessarily God’s law and that by not inviting this former Marine to the Whitehouse luncheon our President is making the correct statement. Advocating for the marginalization of any group will not be tolerated and if that message can be made clear by setting aside his invitation, then so be it that the fruitless fig tree be cut down (Luke 13:9). Jesus’ behavior is a significant disruption of community standards; he is welcoming those who have been cast out and honoring those who have been shamed.

This brings us to the second portion of our reading, the parable of the “Prodigal Son.” Raise a child in the way he should go and he will return to you . . . These words are often associated with our parable reading today and I don’t disagree with such a statement. If we are to ensure the survival of the Christian faith today,

then we should be raising our children to be conscious of a more than just a belief system that will not fail them when times get hard but we should be teaching our children, as well as all those we encounter, about the power we are offered through our relationship with Christ. Ashley Cleveland and Gary Chapman sing a song which contains these lyrics; “Where do I go when I need a shelter? Where do I go when I need a friend? Where do I go when I need some helping? Where do I go? Back on my knees again.” (Where do I go, 1993) So many of our young people today, as well as others within our communities, do not know where to go because they have never been told to get on their knees and to seek Christ the living God when times get difficult. But that is not exactly the direction I want to take this morning.

The parable this morning, as it relates to the opening words of our reading today, teaches us so much more than just our responsibility to raise our children in the faith. Rather it teaches us about what responsibility is required of each of us through our faith. The parable was offered in direct response to those who grumbled about Jesus’ welcoming the disenfranchised and so too speaks to us about how we are to treat one another, not for our own selfish motivations, but rather to bring peace, love and acceptance to all mankind.

There are many today who are gathering together for Worship Service all throughout our community, but it is my fear that they have overlooked a key word in the title of their gatherings. What has been declared a time of to Worship Service has for many come to be accepted as a time to Worship Self. We come together today to Worship Service, not ourselves. We gather to encourage one another in the service of those around us; those not only within our own faith community but within our community at large.

We, like the son in our parable today, have found comfort in coming to our Creator and asking, prematurely I might add, for our share in the estate. We have grown impatient in our walk and have grown tired of waiting on what we believe is owed to us. “It’s my money, and I need it now!” For this son to ask for his share of the father’s estate while the father is still alive is the height of scandals greed. You are as good as dead as far as I am concerned. And so it is with us when we ask of our own Heavenly Father to provide for us in our time rather than to trust that our blessings will be delivered to us in His time. Be careful for what you pray for. Be careful of putting your own selfish desires before the will of God because you, like the youngest son we read about today, just may get what you ask for.

Those listening to Jesus would have been stunned by the scenario he has just painted. The behavior of such a family would have in and of itself been disgraceful. To award an inheritance ahead of its time would have been beyond disgraceful and completely shocking. Remember the two questions we asked earlier, “What are our standards and how do we respond to those who break our standards?” The parable implies that the standards of a community had been broken and in response, the family would have surely brought dishonor upon itself. But it gets worse. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off (Gasp! He left!) for a distant (a foreign, unclean, alien and suspect) country (Oh no!) and there squandered his wealth in wild living. (Tell me it isn't so!) I can just imagine all the mothers, fathers and religious leaders beginning to faint in disbelief?

Here marks an important awareness for us in our Lenten journey today. It is this last act of squandering that the story transforms from one of mere recklessness to a story about how individual recklessness can affect a community. The son has wasted all that has been given to him by selfishly mispending it on worldly pleasure rather than for the glory of his family. How much more do we do the same in our lives today as we spend so reckless the blessings that have been offered to us for our own glory rather than for extending God's Kingdom to a lost and dying world?

But our story doesn't end here. Jesus tells us that the boy *came to his senses*; the son repented of his ways, that is, he experienced a midcourse correction and he found comfort in the awareness that he was not without hope. "When he came to his senses, [the son] said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father." Notice he did not say he returned to his father with the hope that all would be as it had been but rather that he returned to his father with a servant's heart.

And so it is for us today, the midst of our own hunger, need and desolation that we are encouraged that in all that we have, be it a little or a lot, that we are called to an awareness that we are not here to be served, but rather to serve others. Without knowing why the younger son is returning, when the father sees him in the distance, he runs to greet him. It isn't until the son makes his confession that the father calls for a robe, ring and

sandals; thus signifying that he has restored the son as his son. God our Creator seeks reconciliation with each of us, but exactly what part of that reconciliation becomes our responsibility? Our responsibility is in accepting that life is not about us, our wants and our desires; but rather life is about our call to be a servant to all; men, women, young people, blacks, Latinos, those affected by and living with HIV/AIDS, those who are homeless, those who have been marginalized and disenfranchised by society and especially those who God sends into our lives if for only but a moment. We cannot serve everyone, but we can all serve someone and so I encourage each of us to make this message a part of our lives today.

There will come a time in each of our lives that we will be approached by those who have hurt us, used us or have caused us pain. In the distance we will see someone who we have accepted for whatever reason to be dead to us. The oldest son wanted to debate his father's acceptance of reconciliation with the youngest son. We, like the son, may be tempted to say that we have continued to fight the good fight while those around us have wandered away all the while refusing to be in fellowship with them when we are offered the opportunity. Listen to how the father responds, "But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Never let us be without service to one another. Equally as important, let us all be willing to nurture those who come seeking reconciliation and offer up freely a time of celebration without question when the opportunity for healing is made known.

Our sermon hymn today is, "Where do I go," the song I mentioned earlier in the message today. If you are finding yourself asking this question because you are experience a time of heartache, disillusion, pain or need then know that there is only one place that you can go and that is on your knees in commune with God. Want you take this opportunity today to seek God's Will and Way for your life today? This alter is open for all who are seeking not only the will of God today, but those who are seeking discernment and reconciliation, as well. Want you come? Amen!