

Luke 15:11-32: The Prodigal Son

In his book "Shepherds and Bathrobes," Thomas Long tells the following story: "I was once staying in a motel in a large city and was surprised to find, posted to the elevator door, a small handwritten notice that read, "Party Tonight! Room 210. 8:00 p.m. Everyone invited!" I could hardly picture who would throw such a party, or for what reason, but I imagined that at 8:00, room 210 would be filled by an unlikely assortment of people—sales representatives seeking a little relief from the tedium of the road; a vacationing couple tired of sightseeing; a person stopping overnight in the middle of a long journey, looking for a bit of festivity; a few inquisitive and wary motel employees, there because of professional responsibility; perhaps some young people who had slipped out of their parents' rooms, anxiously curious about what was happening in room 210. But alas, the sign by the elevator soon came down, replaced by a typewritten statement from the motel staff explaining that the original notice was a hoax, a practical joke. That made sense, of course, but in a way it was too bad. For a brief moment, those of us staying at the motel were tantalized by the possibility that there just might be a party going on somewhere to which we were all invited—a party where it did not make much difference who we were when we walked in the door, or what motivated us to come; a party we could come to out of boredom, loneliness, curiosity, responsibility, eagerness to be in fellowship, or simply out of a desire to come and see what was happening; a party where it didn't matter nearly as much what got us in the door, as what would happen to us after we arrived."

The parable of the Prodigal Son that we read today in Luke is about a party where everyone is invited - even, or especially, those who don't deserve to be. In the story we read of a wealthy man who has two sons, one who is seemingly faithful and the other who is foolish and squanders his inheritance early in dissolute living. Instead of punishing the younger foolish son when he returns, the father embraces him with open arms, forgives him, and celebrates his homecoming with a big party that upsets the older brother.

That's it in a nutshell: But today I'd like to suggest a different take on this story than we often hear - a socio-cultural perspective that has been offered by the scholar Kenneth Bailey about these three characters.

First we have the younger son, the prodigal. When he asks his father for his inheritance early, in that culture, it would have been akin to saying "I wish you were dead already so I could get my inheritance." It reveals a self-centered lack of love by the son. Next we have the older son: the fact that he doesn't speak up for his father's honor in this key moment would have revealed to the hearers that the elder son shared a similar lack of love or concern for their father. Both sons are entirely and selfishly focused on gaining their inheritance, they simply go about it in different ways. The younger son is open and blatantly hurtful and the father treats him with love anyway and gives him his inheritance early. The older remains silent but continues to work. The younger son is foolish and goes on to use up all of his money on "dissolute living" which translates roughly into "drunken debauchery" - so we can only imagine. The older son appears to be more upright, but as the story goes on it is being made clear that he is just hiding his selfishness better. The older son is like what Mark Twain called "a good man in the worst sense of the word."

Eventually the younger son goes through a major life shift after he loses everything and essentially hits rock bottom, living in poverty, going hungry and feeding pigs to survive. He doesn't immediately go back to his father because in that culture, a father so scorned and humiliated would normally react by shunning his son in anger. But the son "comes to himself" the text says...a beautiful description of what it means to remember who we are and whose we are. And in coming to himself he realizes his only rational option is to return to his father in repentance, acknowledge his sin, and to offer to become his servant.

Garrison Keillor wrote a narrative about the Prodigal Son and describes this moment in the younger son's life this way: "And when he came to himself he said: ... I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants." No, that doesn't sound good. I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him: "Father, it was a great learning experience, and now I'm back, looking for an entry-level position—" No. I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him, "Hi, Dad, how you been? Oh, I'm fine. Had a good trip. Say, you got anything to eat around here?""

But, what does the father do when the son returns? As soon as he sees his son coming, he runs to him with open arms. Bailey points out that a self-respecting Jewish man in that society would have never ran and he certainly wouldn't run to his son who had rejected him: this behavior would have been seen as absolutely humiliating. But the father runs anyway with outstretched arms full of love as he covers his selfish, careless son with hugs and kisses. The prodigal begins to give his speech but the father stops him short, again going against cultural norms which would have demanded a drawn out display of repentance at this point. So full of joy and grace is the father, that he immediately forgives his son even before he has heard him speak.

Dr. Robert Dunham points out, that in this story, grace comes before repentance. He goes on to note that throughout the Bible and the Gospels grace actually precedes repentance. Like God's grace is always there, just waiting for us. It's stunning - it is amazing grace. And so this most undeserving son is shown this lavish grace by his father. Instead of punishing his son, he calls for a party to celebrate him - a party to reinstate him and proclaim the prodigal as his beloved child, as if nothing had even happened. As if he'd never acted to tragically.

The father's reaction and love causes the younger son to be filled with humility and gratitude. But in the elder son, it creates anger, bitterness and jealousy. The elder son's reaction reveals his true intentions according to Bailey: he too desires his inheritance and has been working for it, not out of love, but to stay in his father's good graces in order to get what is coming to him. He turns on his father in the parable and then we see his self-serving attitude - he is self-righteous and despises the mercy of his father towards the undeserving brother. And yet, despite his terrible attitude, the father responds to him too in love and mercy; telling him that all he has is his and always has been. No matter his son's bad behaviors - the father responds in love and mercy. And this is where the story ends - we don't know what the older brother chooses...will he go to the party or not? And what will the hearers of this parables choose? Will they likewise despise this radical grace or embrace it?

No matter which son we identify with - the message is the same for us: God loves you, forgives you, and

welcomes you. Whether our sin is blatant and obvious or hidden and interior - God's gracious invitation stands.

We too often think of God as an angry retributive god - not as the extravagantly loving, almost foolishly merciful and forgiving God like the Prodigal's father. In this parable we see that no one is outside of God's love and forgiveness - no one. We are all of us invited to the party.

As the Church, as representatives of Christ on earth, we need to be the ones to demonstrate this type of radical love, mercy, and grace for all people - we need to be the ones to post those signs up inviting "everyone" to the party. I realize this is hard for some of us -and we may not really want to welcome everyone - we may even be scandalized by the seemingly foolish and lavish grace of God that we see in this story. But if we can't embrace this radical grace, we're going to miss the party. And if the Church isn't willing to invite everyone - then who is?

So, whether you've heard it many times before and believe it - or rarely heard it and have a hard time believing it, let me say it explicitly: You are welcome - you are invited - no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, said, or thought- God loves you, God forgives you, and God welcomes you with open arms. The invitation to grace is always there - you have been invited to the party. Will you go?