

We Had to Celebrate

Luke 15:11-32

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Luke 15 begins with an interesting problem. Jesus is gathering a following of tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and teachers of the law approach Jesus and say they have noticed this problem. It must have been wearing Jesus out, to have such a motley crew of sinners and tax-collectors gathering around him, the riff raff of society, so he finally turns to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law and says, “Help me out, would you? How can I get rid of these sinners and tax collectors? I am trying to start a religious movement and they are dragging me down and wearing me out. What can I do to keep them away from me? The Pharisees and teachers of the law light up at this. Keep people away? Shut people out? Oh, you have come to the right people. We know how to exclude people.

So Jesus tells them a story of a son who treated his father like he was as good as dead, took his inheritance, went off to a distant country and squandered every last penny in wild living. He was reduced to feeding pigs. When Jesus tells them this part, the Pharisees and teachers of the law just about come out of their skin. **HE WAS WITH PIGS?** Doesn't he know pigs are unclean and that is the absolute lowest thing a good Jewish boy would do. As they are frothing at the mouth with disgust and shaking their heads in judgment and condemnation Jesus tells them the worst part. The son is about to get up and try to come back to his father's house. **NO!** Yes, he's starting to get up right now and make his way back. **NEVER!** I'm serious, he thinks he can come and weasel his way back into the family. **SUCH A THING! SHOCKING! A DISGRACE!** Jesus, what do you want us to do? And Jesus asks the Pharisees and teachers of the law, “Help me. Don't let him back.”

You never saw such planning. The Pharisees and teachers of the law set their minds to making sure that worthless son never gets back to the father's house. We'll begin with a media campaign. We will surround him with signs that tell him what a no-good failure he is. We'll publish every one of his mistakes and transgressions. We'll put together pictures that show him walking away from his father loaded down with cash and looking so proud and arrogant, and then we'll show him wallowing with the pigs. People will love to see what a mess he made of things. And we will hammer him over and over again with all of his sins. Reject! Loser! Sinner! Failure! Worthless! Who would ever want you back? You are hopeless and a complete mess. Do you think your father wants anything to do with you?

The Pharisees and teachers of the law have found their sweet spot. They are experts at excluding people. Jesus has had trouble with the blind and the lame and the poor coming to him. So they blindfold the son and set him off toward the father's house. And then they set up all kinds of booby traps. They put obstacles in the way and barriers along the path, some low hanging ceilings and thorn bushes that block the way. The results are hilarious as the son trips and stumbles and bumps his head and gets stuck by thorns and tangled up. The lame keep coming to Jesus. So they make the son use a wheelchair and then put a bunch of steps to keep him from being able to get home. They remind him constantly that he is poor, that he has squandered all his wealth. To get back home they set up a series of fines and fees he must pay, and he doesn't have one penny. He can't pay for the papers he needs to get back home. Without the right papers he is denied access. This worthless young son is shut out everywhere he turns. They report back to Jesus all the chaos they have caused, all the obstruction and barriers and obstacles and hardships they have put between the son and coming home. Jesus is impressed. These guys know how to exclude someone, that is for sure. Still, he can't help but wonder, what if he gets through all of these things you have set up. What if he still tries to get home? What then? They all smile and assure Jesus they have even planned for that. If he still tries to get home, to get back to the father's house, we will build a wall. A wall is sure to keep him out.

I wonder if there aren't more than a few people who would be happy if Jesus came not to call the sinners to repentance but instead to shut them out and shame them and cut them off and exclude them.

Luke 15 begins with an interesting problem. Jesus is gathering a following of tax collectors and sinners. And when he is approached by the Pharisees and teachers of the law who are muttering about the people that are gathering around him, Jesus does not sic them on the sinners. He doesn't call the exclusion squad into action. He tells them a parable. Listen for the word of the Lord, from Luke 15:11-32

“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 servants 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 servants.’ 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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For 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. ²⁶ So 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. ²⁹ But 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. ³⁰ But 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. ³² 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.’”

Nowhere in the parable does Jesus ask for help excluding the son. The son comes back home broken and bowed down, recognizing he doesn’t even deserve to be called a son. This poor kid has been humbled. All he hopes is the father might welcome him back as a hired hand. In short, this is one more lost sinner coming home because there is no place left to turn, and praying only for a few scraps of the father’s love. But Jesus tells us the father doesn’t traffic in scraps and leftovers. Jesus tells us the father doesn’t serve a heaping dose of shame and judgment. Jesus tells us the father doesn’t exclude. He embraces. The father embraces and restores and showers and even smothers the son with love. The father loves. And he doesn’t need the older son to step in and teach him a few lessons in excluding and judging and heaping scorn. All the father wants from the older son is for that older son to celebrate, to celebrate that this brother of his who was dead is now alive. He was lost and now he is found.

Maybe that is all Jesus is asking us to do today, to celebrate. Maybe Jesus is just asking us to celebrate every time one lost sinner repents and finds their way home to the loving arms of God the Father. In the parable he doesn't ask for help excluding, or judging, or condemning, or shutting others out. He seems to say I'll bring them in, and you celebrate with them, that the lost have been found. Lots of folks in our nation are getting on the bandwagon of exclusion and judgment and harsh words to others and to outsiders. I guess we really need to listen to Jesus today. He wants us to celebrate and to rejoice when people get past the barriers and overcome the obstacles and climb the walls and enter the doors of the father's house. He wants us to celebrate and welcome them home.

I was part of a group that once excluded another person. When I found out we had excluded him I felt terrible. The man's name was Jim. He was born and raised in Indonesia. He came to the United States for college, received a degree in engineering and got hired by one of the oil companies. He had a really good job. He never acquired his citizenship, and he was often sent on assignment to places out of the country where he would work. Because he did not have citizenship and worked out of the country, he never qualified for Social Security or Medicare. When he worked he made good money and bought a home in a nice neighborhood near our church in Houston. But then he was diagnosed with diabetes and soon he had to quit work. Now he had no income. He had no medical care. He had no citizenship. He had to sell his house. When his kidneys failed he had to go to dialysis treatment, but without insurance the dialysis cost nearly \$2,000 a month. No income, no insurance, no house, no citizenship, and he had to pay \$2,000 a month for insurance. He burned right through his savings.

Around that time this man named Jim started coming to a Tuesday morning bible study with a bunch of other men.. Jim was immediately welcomed. The men in the group learned about Jim's needs, and it was a really special thing to see them rally behind him. Three days a week Jim needed transportation to his dialysis. The men responded with enthusiasm, taking him to his treatment, waiting while he went through dialysis, and then stopping to buy him a hamburger on the way home. More challenging, Jim faced medical bills of \$2,000 per month for his

dialysis. Checks began coming in to the pastor's fund to help out, and most every Tuesday morning someone would slip an envelope or a handful of bills into my hand. Over four years the men in that group gave nearly \$100,000 to help Jim with his dialysis. I thought Jim felt a part of our group. I thought he had been welcomed.

We were several months into this when Jim said the words that just about broke my heart. A man in the group had taken a special interest in Jim, and they had developed a friendship. One day Jim was talking to this man, who like all the other men had really tried to welcome Jim into the group. Jim said to this man, "I'm not one of you." When the man came and told me this, I was stunned. My heart sank. For Jim not to feel like he was one of us was one of the most devastating things I had ever heard.

Many things ran through my mind at that moment. For one, I felt like we had failed to be the Body of Christ. Somehow Jim didn't feel connected. We loved having Jim, we had learned from Jim. We had laughed with him when he told his story of coming to faith. It had to do with playing a prank on the church in his little village, and getting caught. The story was full of humor. And then we cried tears of joy with Jim as he explained that instead of punishment he had met the grace of God, offered by the pastor of that village church. That was how he became a Christian. Where had we dropped the ball that Jim didn't feel like he was one of us?

Along with that, I felt like we had failed in our love. Paul spends the early verses in I Corinthians 13 telling us that many good, noble, and worthy deeds can be done, but if love is not there, those deeds mean nothing. I felt like an empty gong or a clanging cymbal as I heard this man tell me that Jim didn't feel he was one of us.

I guess the man saw the crestfallen look on my face, for he didn't let me languish long. You see, there is more to the story. I missed the meaning. I heard Jim say he wasn't part of us and assumed we had failed. I assumed in some way we had excluded him. It turns out that was not the case. The man continued, "Jim said he isn't one of us, because he isn't a member of the church. And he wants to join. He wants to be one of us." When I heard that, my spirits rebounded. I was filled with one of the most gratifying feelings I have ever experienced. Jim wanted to be part of the church, the Body of Christ, to be a member with us and our family of faith. How great our joy! Instead of the bitter taste of exclusion, it was a chance to celebrate. And I want to tell you, it is a glorious feeling to celebrate when somebody who was "lost" is found, and finds a place of belonging.

So a few weeks later, Jim slowly made his way to the front of the sanctuary. I asked him the questions of membership, and Jim affirmed his faith with quiet conviction.

Trusting in the mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? I DO

Who is your Lord and Savior? JESUS CHRIST IS MY LORD AND SAVIOR

Will you be his faithful disciple, obeying his word and sharing his love? I WILL

Will you devote yourself to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers? I WILL

And I guess if the parables are true the angels in heaven rejoiced.

Isn't that what we live for? To celebrate that in the Father's House those who were lost are found, and ones who were once dead find life. Isn't that what we live for? And of course we are human, and that ugly part of our nature that wants to exclude and judge and condemn and focus on the failures of others will get the best of us at times. We will sin and fall short. But this parable keeps on speaking, and it leaves us a choice. It always leaves us a choice. We can be the older brother, arms folded and upset that the Father welcomes the lost with open arms. We can decide our highest purpose is to exclude others and shut them out. Or...we can celebrate. We can be a community that truly believes every person belongs to God and that God's love is for each and every person. We can do what Jesus said right before the parable and we can spend ourselves inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, the least, the last, and the lost, to a great banquet. That's what happened to me. At my lowest point Jesus was there for me, and his arms were open. And the church was there for me, with arms that were open. I have been a part of excluding people and it stinks. Jesus wants something else from us. He wants us to celebrate. He wants us to celebrate each and every time a person who is lost finds their way home.