

A Party Problem
A sermon preached by Deborah Hart
At Eglinton St. George's United Church
March 14, 2010

Reading: Luke 14: 1-24; 15: 1-32

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It's one of our favourite Bible stories, often referred to as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son". Each of us brings to it our own vantage point, whether we identify with the elder or the younger child or the parent. Wednesday's morning Bible Study group has been discussing each of the coming Sunday's readings. The group is having some lively discussions. Connie and I joined them for lunch this past Wednesday as I wanted to hear what direction they had gone with today's story. It turned out that all but one of the group members were the eldest in their families. Discussion ranged from birth order to inheritance laws in ancient times, to where are the daughters and mother in the story. There was talk about feasts and who is righteous vs. who is self-righteous. Someone cleverly compared the elder son's response that the homecoming treatment wasn't fair, to the story of the labourers in the vineyard who got hired on for the last hour or two but were still paid a full day's wage like the others who had worked all day long. Sometimes God's response does not seem very fair. It is too gracious or too generous.

As I was working on the theme for today, I was wishing at first that I would be preaching this next week when there would be our congregational meeting to choose the new minister with lunch after church. We could have our own kind of feast or "party". But then I realized that this could turn into one of those bulletin bloopers: "*Next week's topic: The Prodigal Son. Come to vote on our new minister!*" So, perhaps it is a better topic for today, even though there won't be a feast afterwards....

What struck me as I read some of the commentaries and background material on today's reading, is that we have a "party problem" here. First of all, we shouldn't even be having parties in Lent. It's a time of deep reflection and repentance. What was the church thinking of by assigning this reading for the middle of Lent? So it is a problem **for us**.

The party is a problem for the **younger son** in that he feels he doesn't deserve it after all that he's done. He just wanted to quietly slip back home and become a hired hand, earn a decent wage and get a good meal. Now there's all this fuss.

And there is certainly a "party problem" for the **older son**, who doesn't believe for one minute that his younger brother deserves it, especially since he, as the faithful son, has never even been offered one small party to have with his friends. And now there's a "party problem" for the **father**. The party has gained him the lost son but cost him his faithful son.

This party is a problem too for the **community**, for any Jewish son who has disgraced his father by taking his inheritance before his father has died, then squandering the family inheritance and

losing his wealth to the Gentiles, is to be cut off from the community in a ritual called *qetsatsah*. This father has it all wrong, welcoming him back and throwing a party. Should they attend or not?

And this party is certainly a problem for the *devout religious leaders* who are listening to Jesus tell this story!

I'm indebted mostly to William Willimon and Barbara Brown Taylor for some of the insights in this sermon. Willimon says that none of us begrudges the father's welcoming back of the wayward son. What we *do* have a problem with is the way he does it. "*We want the father to be gracious, but not overly so. Homecomings for prodigals are fine, when dressed in sackcloth and ashes, not in patent leather pumps or a tux. Our question is that of the older brother, 'Is it fitting to throw a party for a prodigal?'*"

"What we want is, 'Yes, Howard, glad that you're back home. Now let's do away with that left earring and let's have a bit more responsibility out of you. Go in, [see your mother], have a good, balanced meal and then let's talk about finishing your application to law school.'" (Pulpit Resource, Vol. 23, No. 1)

Instead the wayward son gets the royal treatment, robe, ring and a giant party to which the whole community is invited. What in heaven's name is Jesus getting at in telling this story? What kind of Saviour is he turning out to be after all? We thought he came to raise our ethical standards, and tell people to straighten up and be more responsible. Instead the accusation lodged by the grumbling Pharisees is that Jesus is hanging out and partying with the wrong crowd. He is eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.

Rather than justifying his actions by saying that he is just doing it in order to redeem them, Jesus tells them a whole bunch of stories about God as host at parties where the wealthy and important leaders are turned away while the outcasts and misfits are welcomed in, and about celebrating whenever the lost have been found.

I think we need to understand the context in which Jesus was telling these parables. In today's world we think nothing of what the younger son did. How many young adult children left their parents overseas and came here to the "New World" in search of adventure or success or a new life? Some succeeded and some didn't. One goes away from home to grow up, right? Everyone talks so much these days about "finding themselves" and the individual's needs often take precedence over the family or communal needs, but not so in Jesus' day.

In Jesus' day, most of his listeners would have been rural farmers who understood that their land was their livelihood. They received it in trust from their ancestors and they held it in trust for their children. Land claims and transfers were done in the midst of the community who held the public witness and memory. You count on your neighbours to help you remove your crop, just as they count on you to help build their barns. You invite each other to your parties, and your children marry your neighbour's children to strengthen the bonds of kinship and clan. One's standing in the community was of utmost importance.

The role of the patriarch in Jesus' day was to uphold the family and ancestral honour. And so it was unbecoming of patriarchs to run in public or to ever leave their place at the head of the table when entertaining guests. Patriarchs told their children what to do and certainly did not plead with them. And to transfer land during one's lifetime was a disgrace. It was to happen only upon one's death. And so here we "obviously" have a story of a very weak patriarch who in the end has two rebellious sons he's unable to control.

While the one wayward son deserves to be punished and cut off from the community, the father watches daily and when he sees him returning he runs to get to him before the community does, and to save him from being cut off. He throws a party faster than the community can plan their ritual to ostracize him. The feast restores the family's honour in the village as well as restores the son.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that this is a REUNION story not a REPENTANCE story as most of us have thought. It is about the high cost of RECONCILIATION. It is about learning that our own individual self-worth and identity, our own self-righteousness does not matter nearly so much as learning to overcome our divisions and live together in peace.

This parent is willing to sacrifice his own honour in order to keep the family and the community together. Not only does he not behave as the family patriarch with the younger son, but he also does not behave like the typical patriarch with the older son either. When the older son learns of the party and decides to sulk and refuses to join in, he too attacks the family honour. His behaviour is a terrible insult to his father in front of all the guests. But instead of staying at the head of the table and proceeding with the party as host, the father leaves and goes out to the older son, just as he had gone out to the younger son, meeting both of them where they were.

This father really is a genius in the end. He gives both adult children what they need, not what they want. One needs to be welcomed back in as family. The other needs reassurance of his own place in the family. "Son, you are always with me. Everything I've got is yours." He does not let the younger off the hook by simply being a hired hand. He must act responsibly now as a member of the family. And the other one doesn't get his own party, but he does get everything... alas, including his brother! This father also offers a way for the community to be reunited and save face with one another. All they need do is come to the party, and let go of their own self-righteousness, and be glad that the lost has been found and reunited in love.

The word "prodigal" as an adjective means: **"recklessly wasteful or extravagant or lavish"**. Jesus shows us that **God, the Divine Parent, is the most prodigal of all, lavishly extravagant when it comes to us as family**, doing anything to reconcile us to God's own self and each other. Some days we are the self-indulgent ones and other days we are the self-righteous ones. And depending on which way we are feeling, some days God's actions will seem like "annoying grace" to us, and other days they will convey "amazing grace."

My prayer is that some day we'll be more than children; and instead we'll become prodigal divine parents, not worrying what the neighbours will think or our co-workers, but willingly, extravagantly, lavishing love and grace in our relationships, and going to great lengths to be instruments of peace and reconciliation in our families, communities and our world.

The party is on! You know who God has invited. On purpose Jesus leaves the story open-ended. We have to finish it. Will we dare to go inside, rub shoulders with the other guests who have now become family? Will we dare to be nourished by such an extravagant love, letting go of all our “shoulds” and “oughts” and just receiving and partying in gratitude as God intends? If so, what difference will that make in our daily living?

The party problem has a solution.
Lavish prodigal parenting is the answer.
It's up to us now.
Amen.