

Sermon for Sunday, March 14th, 2010
Rev. Judith Watt

The Courage to Come Home, To Forgive, To Celebrate

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

2 minutes of the CD “Celebration.”

That was party music. It is pretty hard to listen to much of this song before it makes you want to get up and shout for joy, or clap, or celebrate, or dance. We used it at the beginning of our celebration last month at our Chili Cook-off. And eventually we got people up and into a snake dance through the Fellowship Hall downstairs. Can you believe it? And people say Presbyterians are the Frozen Chosen!

I imagine the father in today’s story wanting to put this music on for the party he is intending to throw for his son – the son who had been such a disappointment, the son who had so disrespected his father and his father’s status and money and inheritance, the son who had gone off with that money and lived with wild women and spent all of his money. But in my imagination, this music is what the father would have had played first at the party he was planning. Because his son had come home – his son had returned – he’d returned from what scripture called “the far country.”

Can you imagine wanting to play this music, to party, when someone who has dismissed you and gossiped about you, returns one day to apologize and to say he or she was wrong. Do you feel like playing this music and celebrating when a boss finally compliments your work, after weeks and months of dismissing you? Can you imagine wanting to play this music and celebrate when the family member who is such a pain in the rest of the family’s life comes back and starts offering to help – when he or she has never offered help before? Would party and celebration be your first response? Do you

want to celebrate and play this music when a spouse, who has been addicted to something – who has caused havoc in your life – finally wants to give up the addiction, whatever it was. Can you imagine wanting to party and play this music if one of Al Quada were to come forward and say to the world, “I’ve been wrong. I’ve murdered and plotted and I want to stop.” Would you play this music and celebrate? In any circumstance, when you’ve been hurt, or damaged, or dismissed, or made fun of, or betrayed, can you imagine wanting to pull out all the stops and throw a party –because the person has come to you – to ask for forgiveness? Or would you first want to list all the ways you have been harmed – to create the scorecard – to be sure the other one knew what he or she had caused you?

The father with two sons has experienced the arrogance of his younger son – because that son asked for his inheritance early and wanted to leave. Today that doesn’t sound so strange. Our kids go off across the country-- or farther-- all the time. It’s not so unusual. We don’t expect them too often to stay on the family farm or to go into the family business – not unless they want to. In that day, asking for your inheritance early was do-able, but only with the promise that you’d stay on the farm or on the family’s property to work. The whole society was an agrarian society. Land and being able to manage your land was survival. Families were needed. Sons were expected to stay on. The society wasn’t so focused on individualism and autonomy but your honor or your shame came from your family identity, not your own individual identity. The younger son in this story wanted his inheritance early and he wanted to leave. He wanted his inheritance but he didn’t want responsibility. In that society, his request was far more

shocking to his family and the community – all the neighbors. They would have considered that son to have greatly disrespected his father.

In that society, the honor due a father was something far beyond what we think of today. There was a whole system in place for being sure that the father in the family, the patriarch's honor was upheld. Patriarchs did not run – they did not get up from their place at the head of the table when guests were present – they did not plead with their children – And most of all they wouldn't transfer property to their children before they died, unless they had the child's solemn promise to work the land until the day the patriarch died.

The request that the son makes and the response of the father – both acts are equally shocking.

This story is often called the Story of the Prodigal Son. We think the word means “bad” or “unruly”. The word “prodigal” means rashly or wastefully extravagant. Extravagant. Yes, the son was rash and wasteful and extravagant but the father was “prodigal” too. The father was wasteful and extravagant in allowing his honor to be diminished. It's a story that turns everything upside down for the listeners. It goes completely against the standards of the day. It speaks to the reversals that come with the arrival of the Kingdom of God. It is about “turning” – and “turning toward” and “reversing direction” all in the movement of coming home.

Last year, four former pastors came back to our 50th anniversary celebration – two of the pastors had left here under some duress. No matter what the truth of it all was, the pastors themselves could have seen themselves as having been pushed away. And when they were invited to come back last year, to be part of our celebration, they could

have held onto their wounded pride, or they could have held onto their feelings about having been judged or diminished or having had rights taken away.

And we could have decided to skip the invitation. We could have decided that their being here would be too painful or would be too reminiscent of something unpleasant or too uncomfortable. But they, in their acceptance of our invitation and we, in our inviting, by the grace of God, reversed life – reversed the way things so often remain. They and we were extravagant and wasteful in our actions. Extravagant in our expectations – wasteful in wasting what could have been seen as pride. And it was a coming home – a reversal – a healing – and a window into the abundance of God’s kingdom.

In that Middle Eastern society of Jesus’ day, if a young man had done what this young man had done, the community would have responded upon his return. They would have responded with disgust and punishment. In this particular story, the fact that he “blew” his inheritance and cavorted not only with women but with gentiles and ended up living with the low of the low would have further dishonored his family. They would have literally considered him dead. Gone. Out of sight. The community would rally around the father – still honoring him – supporting him. Kenneth Bailey speaks of a ceremony that was common to a Jewish community – upon the return of a young man such as this. It was a ceremony meant to make the young man certain that he had done wrong. If the community got wind of the fact that the young man was returning, they would meet him on the road, with unpleasant things they’d ground together in an earthenware jug – throw those things at him – garbage maybe – and yell taunts, telling him for sure that he may as well be dead.

In this story, imagine the father spotting his son way off in the distance. The father spots him. This father knows what the community might do. But he also knows his son – the one he thought could be dead and knew was lost – was returning. The father lets go of every last ounce of honor. Because in that day a father, a patriarch would not run. Never. And he would never let his robes come up high enough to show his legs. Aristotle said, “Great men never run.” It was demeaning for a man of his honor to do so. But he saw his son coming. . And he went to the head of the road, and he picked up his robe – and he ran – he ran – he ran to meet this son of his. Barbara Brown Taylor says “he ran like a girl.” He runs and lets everyone see his ankles, runs like a mother and not like a father would in that day – and meets up with his son and gives him a kiss. A kiss – right there in public – where everyone can see him. Reconciliation costs the father his honor. But he saves his son from being cut off. Reconciliation costs the father his reputation – he’s at risk for losing his reputation of being great in everyone’s eyes. But he saves his son – his son who has returned.

The elder son is not happy. He stands with his arms folded and probably thinks – “Who am I, chopped liver?” Because he’s caught up in self-pity and resentment and still lives, like most of us live, in a world in which we think there’s not enough love to go around or forgiveness to go around – a world that says if someone wins another loses. It’s not Jesus’ mind set – this kind of thinking. A thinking based on scarcity – as though there are scarce resource of love and abundance and forgiveness.

So if any of you are sitting there and have never prayed a prayer asking God to receive you – to welcome you home – to welcome you back - with all of your faults and

foibles, with all of the many ways you have wandered off into the far country, pray the prayer now – be courageous enough to open yourself to God’s grace. It can be as simple as Dear God, I want to return to you. I want my life to be in your hands. I want to turn over the controls of my life to you. Even if it’s step by step or little by little – that’s what I want to do. Pray a prayer like that - In those words, or in your own words, pray a prayer asking God to receive you with a kiss, with a celebration, with a wonderful party welcoming you home. One of the songs of a Cursillo/Pilgrimage weekend says - Oh what manner of love the Father has given unto us. That we might be called the children of God. Oh what manner of love the Father has given unto us. Pray the prayer. Come home to the arms of reconciliation and love that awaits you.