

Sermon – Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
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4 Lent – Year C
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“The Parable of the Fatted Calf”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father, and in the name of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. I don't know when I will make a return visit to South Carolina, to visit the place that was a wonderful home for our family for seven years. But I do know that I will get angry shortly after arriving. I can see it coming already. Why? Well, if you fly into Myrtle Beach International Airport and then drive south, things start to go south in a hurry. Leaving the airport, you merge onto Highway 17, which at that point is four or five lanes wide – but not for long. Within the space of a short quarter-mile or so, the road narrows quickly to three lanes, and then to two. Being the upstanding citizen that I am, I will do what I've always done on that stretch of road – get over into one of the two left lanes as quickly as possible. And then I'll get angry; angry at the drivers who insist upon staying in the right lanes as long as possible, zipping past the rest of us only to flick on their blinker at the last moment and merge into traffic ahead of the rest of us. It drives me nuts, these drivers with no regard for responsibility, no willingness to wait their turn. Drives me bonkers, because I know that there will be no consequences for their actions and that they will get where they're going ahead of me.
2. Boy, do these prodigals tick me off! After all, even though I'm the younger brother in my family, I'm an older brother kind of guy – a team player, responsible, always trying to do what I'm supposed to do. And what do I get for all that? Stuck in the left lane, watching the reckless younger brothers of

the world get away with it, scot-free, time and time again. Where's the fairness? Where's the justice? What sort of world are we living in?

3. Well, we live in the sort of world that needs the Parable of the Prodigal Son, as it's commonly called, this passage that is among the most well-known and well-loved stories of the Bible. It's the story of a fast-driving, shallow-living younger brother who asks his father for his half of the inheritance, basically telling his dad he wishes that he, the father, were already dead. And yet, after heading out to some Ancient Near East-version of Las Vegas and blowing his cash on parties and prostitutes, this younger son is able to come home again. He gets away with it! Grace and mercy come rushing in; we can't do anything that God won't forgive, and even those right-lane drivers will get welcomed home. Trample all over the Father; no matter, you can always come home. Love and grace, we've heard it all before.

4. But if that's as far as we get, I'm not sure we're hearing everything that Jesus has to tell us in this parable, so much longer and more richly detailed than the ones he usually tells. Because this isn't just about making mistakes and being able to come home again. This isn't about our repentance, about how if we feel badly enough for our selfish, stupid sins we'll be able to sneak into the Kingdom at the last minute. This is about the father in the parable, and it's about the One that Jesus calls Father. The parable's father has been incredibly wronged; he's been told by a beloved child that he's only good for his money and beyond that he can drop dead. And yet the father is not sitting, waiting for an apology or a confession. He's waiting for his son, scanning the horizon, longing for him and, when he returns, has no time to hear the boy's litany of sins or his plea for a job as a hired hand. No, the father is overwhelmed by his joy – not just forgiveness but a party! The robe, the ring, the fatted calf – no expense is too great for the father whose son was dead and is alive again, home again. It is the father's welcome that moves the parable, not the son's repentance. Or, as the band Mumford & Sons sings it,

“It’s not the long walk home that will change this heart, but the welcome I receive with every start.”

5. And if Jesus intends for us to see God through the lens of this father, what sort of God are we dealing with? Well, a God who is not interested in meting out just deserts, as we talked about last week. No, with God grace and mercy will triumph every time. God doesn’t give us what we deserve, whether we’re more like the younger brother or the older or, as is more likely, some combination of them both. The younger son doesn’t get what he deserves; he gets a party! But neither does the older son get what he deserves; he’s always had the fullness of the father’s love and wealth, just because the father loves him. And now he’s going to be smug and self-righteous about it? Get over yourself, buddy. You see, the father here simply refuses to let the behavior of his sons dictate the terms of his love for them. He just loves them because he is their father. A beloved child is back from the dead and it’s time to party. Is this fair? Of course not, but Jesus tells us that finally the kingdom of heaven IS a party, a celebration and not a courtroom, and a party is no time to keep score or settle accounts. It’s a time for joy, for joyful togetherness and reunion!

6. Whatever judgment needs to be delivered finally lands not on the younger son – or his brother for that matter – but on the fatted calf, killed to give life to the party of resurrection that rages in joy around the throne of God. That’s why, I think, one could make the case that it is the fatted calf who is actually the main character of the parable, the lens through which we can behold the bizarre calculus of grace by which God operates. It is the fatted calf, the Lamb of God, who creates this new world of grace that we can barely recognize, we who are either self-satisfied in our goodness or wallowing in our sin. Neither our goodness nor our sin defines our relationship to God, this God who just isn’t that interested finally on our sinfulness or our saintliness, on what we’ve made of our lives. No, in grace and through the fatted calf, offered up

for the sake of the party, God just wants us home; and home, to celebrate. Together.

7. Of course, this is hard for the older brother, the only one left here clinging to the ways of this life. The father, in the eyes of the younger son, has been dead since the beginning of the parable. The younger son has been given up for dead in his own wanton living. The fatted calf is dead. They're all dead, and being dead are able to see the great joy of resurrection reunion. But the older brother clings to his smug identity. Well, too bad for him. But he will not stop the party of grace. As the Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon writes, "The classic parable of grace, therefore, turns out by anticipation to be a classic parable of judgment as well. It proclaims clearly that grace operates only by raising the dead: those who think they can make their lives the basis of their acceptance by God need not apply. But it proclaims just as clearly that the judgment finally pronounced will be based only on our acceptance or rejection of our resurrection from the dead. The last judgment will vindicate everybody, for the simple reason that everybody will have passed the only test God has, namely, that they are all dead and risen in Jesus. Nobody will be kicked out for having a rotten life, because nobody there will have any life but the life of Jesus. God will say to everybody, 'You were dead and are alive again; you were lost and are found: put on a funny hat and step inside.'" And, Capon continues, "If, at that happy point, some dumbbell wants to try proving he really isn't dead . . . well, there is a place for such party poopers. God thinks of everything."
8. So there you have it, the party of God that overflows with life and joy, welcoming home those who were dead. Younger brothers, come home. God's waiting for you. Older brothers, get over yourselves already and join the celebration. Feast upon the fatted calf, in whose death the party finds life – the only life there ever was, the loving life of Jesus given for all of us.

And now may the peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.