

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 18, 2007

A Grand Celebration of Great Disobedience

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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The fatted calf has a name. A name we should know well. This slaughtered creature may seem a mostly insignificant part of our story this morning, but this is far from true. Ah, but more about him a little later on. We have someone else to consider first.

We don't know his name. But we know him. All too well, I'm afraid. He's the guy (could just as well be a gal) who is consistently discontent. Works hard, but work has long felt like a form of slavery. Loyal, but the loyalty feels like a lock-down at the state penitentiary. Faithful to family, but he's forgotten what family is for. He tries hard, everyday, to convince himself he's happy, that his life has great purpose. What more could he want, really? He has security and all of his integrity intact. But yes, he is nonetheless steadily spiritually offset. A hollow feeling deeply unsettles him in the night, and surrounds him during the day. It feels like lasting love and peace have abandoned him in some back alley miles away from his beating heart.

And that day ... oh, that dreadful day ... when his father threw a grand celebration of great disobedience only solidified such feelings. It was a celebration for his younger brother, a totally undeserved bash befitting a royal king.

What is it with brothers in the Bible, anyway? Adam's sons, Cain and Abel. We know how tragically that sibling rivalry ended. Abraham's sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Their tension had to do with having two different and competing mothers. Isaac's twins, Esau and Jacob. Hairy little Esau arrived first, but Jacob was literally hanging on to his heel; a foretelling of sorts of the day much later on when he stole Esau's birthright.

Given this faith family history, maybe the malcontent son of today's story really had no choice but to feel enmity toward his younger brother. The kid gave him very good reason all the same. That squanderer. Had the audacity to ask for his inheritance before dear old dad was dead. All so he could strike out on his own, be his own man, get out of dodge. In other words, leave the family far behind. This wasn't noble ambition or overachieving for the family's good name. It was betrayal. It was I'm-not-staying-stuck-like-some-sheep-in-a-pen-because-I'm-better-than-that. Despite this bold faced betrayal, their ever gracious father had consented to let his son leave home with the goods.

And what happened? The younger surely proved himself better alright ... if you call partying hard, engaging in completely immoral exploits, and throwing an inheritance to the wind proving something worth proving. That squanderer came home pitifully broke and broken. Like a dirty, disobedient dog approaching its master with tail firmly tucked between its legs. The eldest couldn't help but smirk at how the whole thing blew up in his kid brother's face. And this bolstered his feelings of self-righteousness as the sacrificing, devoted son.

But, underneath his pride, there was that discontentment, that disturbing sense of being trapped forever doing his mundane duties. His resentment toward the squanderer was indeed tempered a bit by some notion of it being better to have failed than to not have tried at all, or something like that. Not much adventure, really, when you spend all your time doing the right, the expected thing.

He was aware of this all-too-familiar feeling, but quickly tossed it like kindling into a fire pit of rage when he witnessed their father's reaction ... a glorious homecoming party for that wayward glutton! Dad bestowed upon him a signet ring of approval, a regal robe, and the choicest, that is, the fattest, calf to be sacrificed in celebration of the homecoming. In the eldest son's mind, this was utterly offensive and ridiculous. Not just jealousy was at play ... it just didn't make any rationale sense. The squanderer should have been shamed, should have but put immediately to work making up for wasted time. The kid should have had to grovel real good for at least a year to win his father's approval and affection back. He should have had to prove himself worthy of being called a son. Something the eldest had done every single day of his life. And for what? He had never been thanked with an offering of a family ring, a beautiful robe and a choice calf. The hollowness haunted him all the more -- and that the squanderer received all this undeserved glory stung like the kiss of a wasp upon his cheek.

Of course he complained. Loudly. Insistently. With a "Dad-are-you-crazy-can't-you-see-he-doesn't-deserve-a-pot-of-beans" tone to his voice. The injustice to him had to be halted. The ever gracious father, of course, would have none of such talk. He defended his actions with a clear, simple reply to the exasperated tirade, saying, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:31-32).

We aren't told to what league under the sea of the eldest son's self-pity those words sank to. Jesus, telling this most familiar parable, leaves the Father with the final word.

It's a preacher's nest of anxiety when needing to try and present such a familiar story in a way that it comes across as fresh and still very much relevant. One way we do this is to tell it from different perspectives. Most common is to emphasize the lost, the prodigal son come home. We've all had times of wandering, or of outright rebellion. So we can relate to the prodigal's shame and his yearning to return home. Also common is to focus most closely on the father, who is also a prodigal because the word "prodigal" means to act lavishly, which he most definitely did when the lost son returned. All those great gifts of gratitude and unconditional love!

A little less common, but increasingly en vogue, is to explore the symbolic meaning of that eldest son. With good reason, because while we all may have prodigal son stories drawn from our own lives and families, and we all may have stories where we've returned home to a lasting love, we perhaps even more so can relate to the dedicated but discontent son.

Not that we spend or have spent our lives resenting our dedication to family, to work, to church. But, spiritually speaking, we all have some degree of discontent in our hearts don't we? It's a chief symptom of sin, of what we call "original" sin ... that which has been passed down the generations since the very first human being rebelled against their Creator. Deep down, we know we can't help but keep striking out on our own, driven by a dark inclination to show we don't really need to remain home in God's eternal heart. And deep down, we know that when we do strive to remain that faithful to God, we can feel constrained and discontented and unappreciated from always doing the right, the expected thing.

Yet don't we also know with a knowing deeper than words, that we truly do want to feel loved by God, to be accepted for all our attempts to be faithful, celebrated even? Both sons in this story need the unconditional love of their father. Both needed, albeit the realization arrived at different times and through different ways, to know that their ever gracious father is always waiting for them to really feel and be at home? Waiting to give them all he's got? Waiting to be received with arms stretched wider than the equator and any other span in any universe?

We know we need this. We know we've been the squanderer. We know we've been the consistently discontent. So what reminds us that God is ever ready to welcome us home with tremendous loving compassion and forgiveness? What tells us with conviction that *true contentment in life comes from knowing we always have a home with God, a place where all that God has is freely, graciously shared with us?*

It's that fatted calf. The choicest one that the Father had decided needed to be offered as a sacrifice of thanksgiving, as a symbol of reconciliation and of family love and unity. He could have gotten a great price at the market for that fatted calf. But he chose to pay that price himself in celebration of his children.

The fatted calf has a name. A name we should know well, this time of year and all year round. It also has a voice. Its voice teaches us about how to be embraced by God whether returning from a rebellious journey or by realizing that home really is where the heart is. Beyond this parable, with all its symbolism, and straight to our hearts this morning ... the voice, the name ... is Jesus.

Amen.