

**Sermon, 18 March 2007—Fourth Sunday in Lent—Laetare**

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 34; Second Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32

The parable we heard today is one of the most beloved of all the stories we have received attributed to Jesus. It seems to exemplify the tender welcome that all of us long for and that we come to think of as characteristic of the message of the Son of God: inexhaustible in his positive regard of human beings, full of hope for reconciliation and homecoming, speaking patiently on behalf of his tirelessly loving Father.

At the same time, this story, like Luke's story of Martha and Mary earlier, can provoke ferocious reaction or smothered resentment. Both stories work so effectively at pricking something inside certain people, that it is worth wondering what the purpose of the story actually is. Both these stories exist only in Luke's Gospel. Both feature a seemingly undeserving younger sibling, whose sense of self-indulgence seems hyperactive, coupled with a hard-working older sibling, whose sense of right and wrong seems jammed in overdrive.

The tearfully dissolute among us, as usual, claim center stage. These are those of us who present ourselves as weak-willed and sensitive, who claim to be weak-willed because we are sensitive, too responsive to beauty, too open to emotion, too quick to kindle at human warmth—giving in is a way of appreciating, so how could we not stay out all night as a sign of how much we prize beauty or cleverness or camaraderie or general joie de vivre? The fact is, we are sensitive because we are weak-willed, unable to harness today to tomorrow or flesh to soul. Nor should you think that when there is only one cookie left and three pairs of hands reaching for it that our will turns out to be all that weak. Precisely such an effusive overgrown life is

relieved to believe that we can still claim the prize even with our soggy stained ticket-stub whose numbers you can no longer read. This is exactly what we've been hoping for, if not exactly counting on, from the moment we snuck off the farm decades before. Even salvation can be snatched to our self-satisfaction. God *is* good. And it really *is* all about us!

The driven and righteous, the pillars of the world and salt of the earth, the virtuous and worthy, are outraged. This is exactly what we've been dreading, after decades of making sandwiches that other people pick over without appetite, let alone relish, and of repairing tools that other people ruin, then leave out in the rain to rust. Deferring gratification does not mean renouncing it. In fact, there is no better way to turn desire into lust or hunger into gluttony than to put off gratification. That causes the waters of postponed longing to swell into a flood of finally getting what's ours and coming into our own, with hell to pay; and our terror at this angry sense of worthy entitlement may have a lot to do with reinforcing the dam of deferred gratification. Who could channel that torrent once the dam is breached?

When you get right down to it, neither one of these boys seems a good long-term prospect for the family business. But the old man doesn't come across much better. He foolishly gives in to his impatient youngest son, who is eager to collect his inheritance before his father's death. He liquidates half his estate, confirming the boy's lack of respect for him. He shows no better sense when the boy returns, but throws a big party at a moment's notice and kills off the fatted calf. Apparently he is no more self-disciplined than the boy he welcomes back. In his excitement, he forgets his older son out in the field, who continues to prune or hoe or water, oblivious of the turn of events back home, confirming this boy's resentment of him. The story ends with the father rather implausibly asking his older son to celebrate the

return of the one who has destroyed half their family's wealth. The old man shows an inability to learn from the past, a lack of comprehension of his two sons, and an insensitivity that beggar belief.

What is going on here?

This is the third of three stories that Jesus tells in Chapter 15 of the Gospel according to Luke. The opening verses of the chapter set the stage. We find the scribes and Pharisees bluntly and explicitly condemning Jesus' actions in gathering around himself a feasting community made up of the criminal and immoral. Jesus' reply is deft. Why shouldn't we be joyful when what is lost is found? Wouldn't a shepherd be happy to find a sheep that had strayed or a woman to find a coin that was mislaid? Wouldn't a father be delighted that a wandering son had returned?

However, these don't quite seem to be three parallel stories. In the first two, about a lost sheep and a lost coin, the story is about the one who searches; what is lost remains rather passive. The third story seems not to be about a search, but about a willful wasteful son who returns to his father. The search seems to be the son's, and it seems to be a search for the security, even love, which the son abandoned.

The confusion increases when we notice the moral point made at the end of the first two stories: there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents. But that seems to belong best with the third story. The sheep and coin do not repent; they are found. Only the wandering boy seems to act out what we would recognize as repentance. The interesting point, though, is that we do not hear the angels rejoicing at the end of the story of the Prodigal Son. Instead, this story skillfully ends with the father asking his oldest son, "Shouldn't *we* rejoice now that your brother has returned?" This is the same question Jesus deliberately leaves as his last word to his resentful critics.

“Why are you angry that I am delighted to break bread with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners of all kinds? Aren’t they your long lost siblings? Now, because I am here, they have returned; isn’t that a reason to rejoice? There is joy in heaven when a sinner repents; shouldn’t we rejoice as well?”

A closer look underscores our sense of something missing in the story of the indulgent father. In the original Greek, the words for repentance and rejoicing do not occur in third story. The wasteful self-centered boy, we are told, merely “comes to himself.” He knows he is better than where he finds himself; he is the pampered son of gentry, not a swineherd. He reflects on his situation, not out of moral responsibility, not on how he wounded and let down his family, but out of self-interest. He knows where his bread used to be buttered, so he decides to return home for a meal with breath-taking arrogance that he can pull it off, that he can con his father again. You might protest that he says, “Father, I have sinned.” I would respond that any words are easy to say when you are starving. In a move rare for the Gospels, the narrator shows us the son’s reasoning. There is no evidence of a change of heart. The Greek text does not say that he “repents,” but rather that he “comes to himself.” This omission is telling, since the moral at the end of the two previous stories is that “repentance” leads to joy.

The giddy servants and the lax sentimental father, we are told twice, begin to “celebrate.” Again here the key word is avoided: the Greek text does not say that they “rejoice” over the returned son, as the angels in heaven do over the repentant sinner, but rather that they “celebrate.” The omitted word for “rejoice” is a significant one, because it is close to our word “Eucharist.” In the previous stories, both shepherd and woman, having found the lost sheep and the lost coin, say to their neighbors “give thanks with me, make Eucharist with me”—clearly an invitation pointing to the

Christian banquet where Jew and Gentile joined to give thanks. We expect this third story—the more wrenching and human of the three stories—also to incorporate this call to join in a Eucharistic banquet. But “rejoicing” as “giving thanks” is not found there. How can this incompleteness be?

Now, probably the Pharisees and scribes may have been saying exactly these things about the tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus: that they felt no true repentance, that anyone can say “I have sinned,” that a spoken admission of guilt should be confirmed by austere penances rather than abandoned parties, that Jesus’ reckless welcome of the unclean was more like a beer bash than an induction into solemn upright sober shame-based living. Jesus could wryly be admitting to the scribes and Pharisees that he knew that they did not believe true repentance or true rejoicing was involved in what they saw around Jesus. As the father does, though, Jesus is saying, “Who cares? Isn’t the bottom line that it is better to have these wanderers back with us? Can’t we simply be happy about that?”

But Jesus knows his crowd. He knows the scribes and Pharisees find much to blame. They are indignant over the sins of those Jesus receives. So he knows the moral offensiveness of the prodigal son will awaken the judgment of his hearers. But the prodigal son is the red herring. The person to watch in each story is the main character. The main character is the one first introduced. In the first two stories, the shepherd and the woman are the main characters, continually present and active. They are the ones who come into contact with everyone else in the story. In the third story, the father is the main character, the one first introduced, the one who comes into contact with everyone else. But is the father active? In the first two stories, the main characters are also the ones who search. They go looking for what is lost and find a sheep and a coin. But what does the father go out looking

for? Not the prodigal son—that freeloader returns on his own, with all the ambiguous motivation we noticed. Though the father runs to greet him, he has not gone out looking for him.

No, the father goes out looking for the oldest son. The main character in all three stories, you see, goes looking for what is lost. Who then is the one Jesus points out is really lost? Not the prodigal, but the oldest son: the righteous, virtuous, loyal, steady, stubborn, self-driven, lonely resentful, bitter, dying oldest son. He is the lost coin, the lost sheep. Who then is the one whose repentance we are waiting for? Who then is the one that the angels are waiting to rejoice over? That is why “repentance” and “rejoicing” are not mentioned, because Jesus turns to the Pharisees and scribes at the end of this third story and waits. He waits to see if those who are truly lost will repent. There can be no true rejoicing until then. The easy partying of his companions, whose standards were never all that high to begin with, can only become true Eucharistic thanksgiving at the return of the rigid and the proud, only when they join in. The story remains unfinished, because only the scribes and Pharisees can finish it. But to do so, they must recognize themselves as the older son, the lost ones that Jesus has come into the world seeking, and repent by joining in the thanks for the unworthy who are already there. They must sit down at the Eucharistic banquet table with those that make them unclean. They must repent of the barrier they have built by being good so the angels can rejoice and give thanks.

The rage of the righteous is the devil’s delight. The same held breath we hear at the end of the parable occurs whenever the steady workers, the loyal members, the good people, find anger overtaking them at work, at home, at church. The fault is not with their virtue. The sin lies in their preference for their own way, in their resentment over feeling set aside by

what they do not value, in their loss of control, in other words, in their pride. Of course this parable provokes irritation. How dare Jesus suggest that the righteous are lost in a self-indulgence of their own as deep and relentless as the prodigal's? But they are; they are lost in their self-centered and self-serving insistence that they are right. How dare Jesus suggest that the righteous are the ones who need to repent?

The shepherd found his sheep and gave thanks; the flock was together again. The woman found her coin and called her neighbors together and made Eucharist; she shared her gratitude. The father comes out for the older son daily and says, "This is your brother or your sister; won't you come in?" We remain suspended in that moment. Week after week, the father comes out and says, "What was lost to us has found a way to rejoin us; isn't that reason to rejoice?" The story has not ended. Year after year, the father comes out and says, "We thought they were dead, but they are alive; how can we help but give thanks? It's your repentance we wait for."

So, while the first two stories end, the third does not. Only the older brother can end it; only the Pharisees and scribes can end it; only you and I and all of us, who are so clear about how we think things ought to be and so resentful that they are not that way, can end it. Angry virtue is Hell's foundation. By comparison, it is easy to dislodge vice. But how do you change if you think you are right?

But it is God who comes seeking all those that try to set themselves apart, all those addicted to perfection, all those offended by the mess of life. And such a persistent pursuer and ardent lover does not give up until even the righteous repent and give the angels cause to rejoice around the throne of the one God that we praise today, just as we hope to enter into the Eucharistic banquet of praise that lasts for all of eternity.