

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.24.2019



## Open Arms

The Reverend Pen Peery

Luke 15:11-32

‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.



‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.”

Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “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.” ’

We are a little less than halfway through the season of Lent on our way to Easter Sunday. This Lent we are following Jesus through the gospel of Luke after he sets his face toward the cross in Jerusalem. Our second Scripture picks up just where our first reading left off – with a beloved parable. Listen with me for the word of God.

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In the Jewish tradition, a favorite way to teach is to tell a story. That’s why, when Jesus saw a teachable moment, he told parables.

I’ve just read the most familiar story about two brothers told by a Jewish rabbi – but Jesus wasn’t the only rabbi to tell a story. So here’s another:

It’s an old story, perhaps older than the one Jesus told, and also one about two brothers. These brothers were in the flour milling business. One of the brothers was married and had children, the other was single. They were equal partners in the business, and they made an agreement that at the end of each day, they would take any extra flour that had been milled and divide it into equal shares, and each brother would take his share home and put it in his storehouse.

But one day the single brother began to think, "Here I am, unmarried with only myself to care for and my brother has a wife to support and children to feed. It isn't fair to divide the flour evenly. My brother should have more of the flour. So



that night, he took some of the flour out of his own storehouse and so as not to embarrass his brother, he went under the cover of darkness to his brother's storehouse and secretly left the flour.

It just so happened that at that very same time, the other brother began to think, "Here I am with the richness of a family. I have a wife. I have children, and my brother has no one to take care of him when he gets old. It's not fair to divide the flour evenly. My brother should get more, so he too took some of his flour and under the cover of darkness, slipped it into his brother's storehouse.

Every night, unbeknownst to the other, each brother did this, always amazed the next day by the mystery that somehow the level of flour in their storehouses never seemed to diminish. Until one night, their arms filled with sacks of flour, they met each other in the darkness and realized what had been happening all along. With tears of loving joy, the two brothers embraced there in the darkness.

According to the old tale, when God saw this, he touched that spot on the earth and said, "This is where I will build my house. For my house must always be a place of great joy."

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That's the hope anyway – that God's house will be a place of great joy.

But the family that gathers in God's house doesn't always behave in the ways that God hopes.

That's why Jesus told the stories that he did –

about lost coins,

and lost sheep,

and about lost brothers...

somewhere along the way, God's people forgot how important it was to find joy in being a part of God's family.

Instead of being joyful, the Scribes and the Pharisees were upset.

The issue was about the company Jesus was keeping.

They were grumbling. They were having one of those after-the-meeting-parking-lot-conversations about the things rubbed them the wrong way.



You are to be forgiven if you have a negative reaction whenever you hear mention of the Scribes and the Pharisees. We've been conditioned to think of the Scribes and the Pharisees as bad characters in the gospels; they are usually the ones who are in some kind of conflict with Jesus about something or another. But, really, the Scribes and the Pharisees are kind of like us: they are rule followers, they're committed to the faith, they are your almost-every-Sunday church-goers.

Their beef was why, if they followed the rules, were others not expected to do the same?

Their frustration with Jesus was about why he would associate with the very same kinds of people that they so faithfully tried not to become.

When they saw Jesus connecting with and ministering to the tax collectors and the sinners – instead of having their hearts filled with joy, those hearts were filled with something else: disdain, arrogance, self-righteousness.

Jesus longed for a different reaction.

And so he began...There was a man who had two sons...

Depending on your own life story, you have probably developed an empathy for one son or the other. Of the three characters in the parable, it's the sons, the brothers, we understand.

There are some of us who know what it is to feel like you have to get away; like you need to strike out; to distance yourself from what was home. Not because home was bad, or unhealthy...that's not what motivated this younger brother. No, he left because what he cared about more than his family...was himself.

Some of us know that journey. And like that younger brother, we know that it leads to places that become more and more isolated. More and more lost. Even to the place where we don't recognize who we are anymore.

The younger brother's moment came when he had squandered everything and was dreaming about the pods he was feeding to the pigs. At first glance, it almost seems like that younger brother was sorry – repentant over his poor choices...but, really, he had no other place to go, and he was hungry.



So he rehearsed a story that he hoped his father would accept.

Others of us know what it is to carry the mantle of responsibility like that older brother. We know how important it is to be dependable.

We're the ones who follow-through on our commitments.

We actively parent our children, or actively care for our parents...some of us even do both.

We pay the bills.

We say yes when asked to be on the PTA, or the church committee, or the non-profit board.

We try to help those who need our help.

We're the ones who do things decently and in order.

I have a good of empathy for this older brother, can you tell?

I can imagine myself standing outside the door, arms crossed, head shaking, baffled by the celebration going on inside the house.

Why the best robe?

Why the fatted calf?

Why the family ring?

Why the ostentatious (and expensive) party – a party, by the way, that was paid for out of the part of the inheritance that belonged to the older brother (since, as you remember, the father's money had already been divided between the two sons, and the younger brother's portion had already been wasted...)?

"All that is mine is yours," the father said to his oldest son.

Yes. Yes it is, thank you very much.

I'm not necessarily proud that recognize that righteous indignation...but I do.

I don't think it is hard for us to see why joy would be hard to come by at that family reunion of those two brothers. And that may explain why we have a difficult time understanding the third character in the story: the father. Because the father acts in ways that we can hardly imagine, much less emulate.



The late Peter Gomes was a professor at Harvard Divinity School and the head of their chapel. Taking stock of the situation and looking at the willful, foolish, self-centered and indulgent younger brother on the one hand, and then petty, spiteful, jealous, self-righteous older brother on the other, Gomes writes:

I think we should pity the poor father, who has to live with this conspicuous vice and the even more conspicuous virtue: perhaps he should have run away and left the place for the two of them to fight it out.

He didn't, though, because the story is about him, and we know he won't run away.... We know of his character, his nature, because of what his sons say and do. The prodigal tells us the character of his father when he says at his lowest point... "I will arise and go to my father." He didn't expect the fatted calf, but he knew enough to know that his father, by his very nature, by his very character, would not, could not, disavow him...[and that] his father would be there to receive him. He knew... that his father's nature was love; and his knowledge was rewarded and returned....

So, too, did the older brother know this, Gomes says, and it is on the basis of the father's love and justice that he complains--for you complain only to someone in whose justice you have confidence. Both sons presume upon what they know to be there and what they know to be theirs: the unconditional love of the father for his own.

This is the heart of the gospel and of Jesus' message [says Gomes]: no one is too far gone, too low, too abased, too bad to be removed from the unconditional love of [God] ... and no one is too good, too dutiful, too full of rectitude, for that love. It is the nature of the Father to love those to whom he has given life....

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This morning – like many mornings – I watched as you looked upon Charleston/Ollie while I held her/him in my arms at the baptismal font, and then walked her/him down the aisle. Your eyes were full of love and wonder as I sprinkled her/his head with the waters of grace that little Charleston/Ollie had done nothing to deserve...other than being born.

Did you know that is how God sees us still?

In spite of the ways our lives might resemble that younger or older brother



in Jesus' parable; in spite of the things that we've said, or done, or thought – when God looks upon us, it is as if our foreheads are sopping wet:

“see what love the Father has for us that we should be called ‘children of God’”

– and so we are.

I suspect the key to having God's house be a place of great joy – where sisters and brothers freely give of themselves for the sake of each other – and where all are welcomed no matter their station – I suspect the key is by first remembering the joy that God finds in us.

For when we trust that – how can we not reflect that joy in the ways we love one another?

