
We Had To Celebrate

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder

Lent 4 – Year C

I really love the *first half* of today's Gospel reading. It's a story familiar to all of us—one that is familiar even outside our faith tradition. The story of the Prodigal Son is as ubiquitous as the story of the Good Samaritan. And each time I read or listened to this Gospel story aloud throughout the week, I thought: this really is such a beautiful story!

First we have the younger sibling who is just fed up with being at home. I would guess that at least some of us gathered this morning know that feeling. The feeling of... I am done with this place. Done with these people. There's a whole world out there waiting to be discovered! And I am the person to discover it. I can't just waste away in this land of predictable! Give me the land of the free! The land of adventure! There's so much more to life than this. I'm trapped. I love you guys, but my time has come to spread my wings. Give me your blessing and give me my freedom and you lovely people can just hang tight doing the same thing every single day for as long as you live. But not me! I'm out. The world is my oyster!

And perhaps some of us gathered here also know the feeling of... Oh God. What have I done. This is not what I signed up for. How could I be so stupid. The only thing worse would be to go home and beg forgiveness. OK maybe that wouldn't be so bad. I'd have to admit I was wrong, yes, and MAN that is HARD... but at least I'd have food in my belly and a roof over my head. Even if my family chose to disown me for my behavior, perhaps they would hire me. I'd rather care for my father's sheep than this stranger's pigs. Oh, I can't believe it's come to this. I feel like the scum of the earth.

Fewer of us may resonate with the father—who throws all cultural norms out the window on multiple occasions. Giving a son—a second son—their inheritance before the first son? Nope. Not happening. Running out to the same son—running—to meet this ungrateful child and welcome him home? Not in a million biblical years. I actually think it's probably easier for us in this modern day to relate to the father than it would have been for the people hearing Jesus tell this story first-person. Helping a younger child out? Seeing the hunger in their eyes to explore the world, perhaps recognizing a hunger you once had yourself, and sending them on their way? Not unheard of today. And then the anguish of thinking your child is gone forever, only to see them walking up the driveway—almost unrecognizable to anyone but you, their parent, who watched them take their first breath. Well yeah, I can totally see why the father would run to greet his son. Who wouldn't? A father in Jesus' time wouldn't.

But Jesus isn't telling this story to a group of parents nodding in empathy and understanding. He's telling this story to some Pharisees and scribes, grumbling about Jesus' habit of eating with tax collectors and sinners. And the story Jesus has just told is one they would likely scoff at. What kind of father gives away his inheritance and runs to his ungrateful child? What kind of father heaps shame upon shame on himself just to connect with his children? The same kind of father whose son eats with tax collectors.

And if the story ended here, I'd be ok. Really, I could end with the audacity of God loving us with abandon.

I met a woman this week who told me of this beautiful picture she had seen early that morning—a pencil drawing of a man lifting another man up in the air. She said you could only see the legs of the man being lifted, but that's how you know it was an adult being lifted up into the air. The shadow of the two men in the drawing depicted something different though.

The shadow showed the joy of a father lifting a baby up above his head. Pure joy.

It's a beautiful story.

But it doesn't end there.

The story goes on to describe the older brother, and I know of at least one person in this room who resonates with him. The oldest child who is perhaps a bit of a perfectionist. Who tries so hard to get everything right, to the point where it's the norm, and people only seem to notice when she... I mean he... gets it wrong. Whose younger brother is smarter, funnier, and more interesting... but never works as hard as she does at school... yet somehow he gets all the attention and celebration for making a C in a class after she's been making straight A's all year with no one but her teachers noticing?!? Oh wait, they didn't get A's and C's in Jesus' time? Right. Must have my stories crossed. In any case, this is not the part of the story I like. I am well and good with the younger son being welcomed back into the fold with the best robe and the fattened calf, until it's at the expense of the older sibling. Then I switch from, awwww... to not fair!

This is one place in the story where the changes in cultural norms don't change the message. It's as unfair now as it was 2000 years ago. So I have a love/hate relationship with this story. Or perhaps it's a compassion/resentment relationship. I love the first half! I have compassion on the naïve child and the joyful father. It's a great story! But I bristle against the second half of the story. I struggle with feelings of entitlement and resentment. I maybe even pout a little.

The story reminds me of a term I used a lot in college: NIMBY. Not-In-My-Back-Yard people. I was majoring in politics and environmental studies, and so often there would be some kind of community need that everyone would get behind in theory until it came time to put said solution into practice. Then suddenly everyone who had previously supported the initiative would throw their hands up in the air and yell... whoa there! Not at my expense! Not in my back yard!

Here's the rub in this week's Gospel. Here's the truth to wrestle with throughout the week. God's love is lavish. It is abundant and it is undeserved and it is over the top and it breaks all cultural norms and it is a thing to behold! Not to understand! It is awe inspiring. And everyone in this room can know that crazy love. But it's not fair. That same over the top love God has for you, God has for the creep down the street who grates on your nerves. The same unconditional love God has for you, God has for the person who has wronged you again, and again, and again. That same awe-inspiring crazy love God has for everyone in this room is even more awe-inspiring and crazy outside this room. It's true! It's not fair. And some days I thank God it's not fair. But some days? I want to shake my fist at God and say, "not in my back yard!" Or just pout in a corner like a toddler. Not fair.

Every day, God is throwing a party for the prodigal sons and daughters of our time. Every day.

And the only person keeping us from joining in on the celebration is ourselves.

In the today's story, neither son is pushed away. Both sons bring the father great joy. The father says, "we had to celebrate and rejoice."

The question left hanging is, will you say YES to God and join in the celebration?