

Luke 15:1-3; 11-32

Lent 4 March 6, 2016

grace is a joke

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For years we had a magnet on our refrigerator that reminded me to laugh every time I saw it. "**Lets put the fun back in dysfunctional.**" One of my daughters put it there. I say nothing like a little humor to take the sting out of family craziness!

Frederick Buechner, the writer and preacher, suggests "all the parables of Jesus can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people." The Parable of the Prodigal Son, he says, is the most comic *and* most sad of all. I do have a little quibble with the title given the parable. Why is it not the Parable of the Absent Mother? Is the father in this parable a widower, desperately trying to hold on to his two sons and manage his farm alone, while dealing with his grief? Couldn't this also be called the Parable of the Angry Son, who finally vents all his pent up resentment toward his reckless, self-centered brother and his longsuffering indulgent father who puts up with his shenanigans again and again, never noticing his obedient and hardworking his older son? Or we could call it the Parable of the Family Triangle, because, after all, this is what we have with the two sons and their loving, some might say, indulgent father.

It's a familiar story. Which makes it all the more challenging to hear it anew. The young son, whom we call prodigal, walks off the family farm with fistfuls of his inheritance. It's an explicit rejection of his father, who is left yearning for his wayward son, who apparently could care less how much his father loves him. Or maybe he is simply so self-centered that he is clueless of that love. As for his brother, the two of them never cross paths, never exchange a word. Off he goes and in due time has squandered all his money in an extravagance we can only imagine, leaving him in such a wretched state that even the pigs, whose quarters he must clean, have a better life than he does. Perhaps it was the encounter with the pigs that by comparison revealed how filthy desperate his life had become. Most addicts who recover know this moment. But Buechner argues, "there is no indication that he realizes he has made a fool of himself and broken his old man's heart, no indication that he thinks of his old man as anything other than a meal ticket." Maybe. In any event, he knows where home is and sets out on the way of return to the only secure hope in the world. One can imagine him rehearsing the speech that will surely soften his father's heart, at least enough to get him a meal and maybe a place to sleep in the barn. Walking that long walk home he

tries to get the words exactly right: "Father, I have sinned against you and against heaven, I am no longer worthy to be called your son." He says it again and again.

It is often said no matter how far we wander we know where home is. That is what the Prodigal Son is counting on. His father spots him on the horizon. With the love that only a broken-hearted father can know, he embraces his wayward son before he has a chance to say his well-rehearsed speech. In fact, there is really nothing to say other than get this kid some good clothes. He's famished: kill the fatted calf. Tell the neighbors. Lets have party. He's back. He's back.

You notice, of course, what he doesn't say, which one might expect a father to say who has been treated the way he has by this reckless son. There is no "I told you so." There is no "how could you?" There is no "you'll be paying for this for a long time." He will have none of it. The sheer love that broke his heart in the first place is the only thing that comes pouring out. Therapists might cringe. No logical consequences other than those at the pigsty. The lost one is now the found one. And so the party begins. Frederick Buechner asks, "Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the Gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all? Heard as anything else, the Gospel is the church's thing, the preacher's thing. Heard as a joke – high and unbidden and ringing with laughter – it can only be God's thing."

What I imagine is the next day when the party is over. What happens then?

That's the obvious challenge with the sullen older son out in the field who can't even bring himself to call the wayward kid his brother. All he has is resentment and rage, unable to sense his own broken heart, yearning for the love of his father that has been there all along and will remain. Just as anyone who has been desperately lost, frightened for your life, can understand the prodigal son, so anyone who has felt the chains of pride, envy and resentment can know the terrible predicament of the older son standing outside the party, arms crossed, lips pursed, knees locked, feet firmly planted, eyes fixed on his pleading, grieving father.

What happens? We don't know. Will he let go? Will the laughter and the love reach his bound soul? Buechner says, "Blessed is the one who is not offended that no one receives what he deserves, but vastly more. Blessed is the one who gets the joke, who sees the miracle."



In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

