

The Parable of the Really Big Party

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Texts: Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Jesus was an incredible rabbi. It is a matter of scholarly debate whether Jesus knew how to read, but it is clear that he knew the stories of his people well, and he knew them deeply. Given her astounding trust and willingness to cooperate with God in the birth of Jesus, I'll give the credit for this to Mary, his mother. She must have raised him on the stories of their people, patriarchs and matriarchs, queens and kings, prophets and prophet killers, sinners and saints, fanciful tales and legal doctrines. Maybe trying to make sense of the strange circumstances of the birth of her child, maybe trying to deal with the public stigma of how things played out, maybe because she was a strong woman seeking sources of resistance in a patriarchal culture, maybe she's the one who started Jesus down the path of not accepting the tradition at face value, but noticing the undertones, the subthemes, the hidden heroes, the dissenting voices, what was being said and what was not being said, and what God was trying to say in the midst of human words. Because wow, Jesus did all that. He knew the canon, and with astounding spiritual creativity, he used it to teach things that no one had taught before, but that once you heard it, you would say, "Yes, that's been there all along."

One of the foundational themes of the scriptures on which Jesus was raised was, I guess to put it simply, "who's in and who's out?". One strand of the ancient stories says the descendants of Abraham are in and others are out. Another strand says those who keep the commandments are in and others are out. Another says those who support king and country are in and others are out. Yet another says those who love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with their God are in, and others are out. All those strands and more are there, sometimes mutually exclusive, sometimes complementary, sometimes tolerant, sometimes dogmatic.

And because history doesn't sit still, and change is the way of all things, this who's in and who's out was a pressing question in Jesus' day. As was the case in the ancient stories, the options were all over the place. You had those who placed emphasis on family lineage and being descendants of Abraham. Even though there was no Jewish king, you had the king and country people, oddly including both the chief priests, who worked with the foreign ruler, and the zealots who sought to rebel from that ruler. The most popular school of thought seems to have been that of the Pharisees, who sought to define the people of God as those who kept not only the written law, but also the oral, unwritten law, of which they were the authoritative keepers. Then you had probably the vast majority of people who didn't worry too much about identity or law or king or country and were just trying to get by, not lose their family land and raise their kids.

For whatever reason, Jesus ended up in greatest conflict with the Pharisees. I suspect that is not because the Pharisees had it all wrong, but because they had it almost right. Jesus wanted people to follow the teaching of the Pharisees. He even says, of the Pharisees, at one point, "do as they say," but adding, as you may remember, "not as they do." What the Pharisees had right was that one's connection to God should impact all of life. The way you

treat others, the way you spend your money, the way you make your money, the way you worship, the way you forgive, the way you resist oppression. We think of them as legalistic, hypocritical dupes, and indeed the gospels sometimes portray them as just that, but if that were the reality, Jesus could have just dismissed and ignored them. No, they were on to something, something close even to what Jesus was all about: that one's connection to God should impact all of life.

I'm talking about the Pharisees so much here because they were the intended audience of the parable I read earlier – often called the parable of the prodigal son, but that should really be called the parable of the dysfunctional family. You probably know the story, so very quickly: Dad and two sons. Younger son, perhaps feeling like a spare, basically says to his dad, Dad, I think I am done being your son, so please give me now everything I would normally get when you die, and I'll be outta here. Strangely, the father does just that and lets the son go (perhaps happy to see him go?). Shockingly, the son blows everything in short order, and winds up almost dead and utterly alone. As the story so poignantly says, "No one gave him anything." He goes back home, the father throws a blowout party for him, glad simply to have him back. The older brother though isn't having it. Like the Israelites who grumble in the wilderness because God hasn't done enough for them, he grumbles about slaving away year after year, and never getting a party of his own. The dad says, look, older son, you are awesome, I love you, all I own is yours, but that doesn't keep me from loving your brother too. I mean, geez, he was dead and gone and now he's alive and back. Come and join the party!

Poignantly, we never hear what the older brother does. You can hear the music in the background, the shouts of mazeltov!, the friends saying "dude, your back!" but the scene ends with the older brother staring at the door, not knowing himself what he's going to do.

Now to tell you the truth, I can't identify with the younger brother in this story. You all don't know my life story, but let me tell you...it's boring. I had a happy childhood. I was never a rebellious teenager, or college student, or young adult. Even though liberal, and pacifist and social justice-y, I still went to church almost every Sunday during college. Janine and I got married when I was 22 and she was 21, and I went straight to seminary and then became a pastor. My rebellion has been against nationalism and capitalism and fundamentalism and other kinds of meanness, not against God or faith. I'm a perfect example of the line mocking liberals, "talk left, live right."

But I can't identify with the older brother either. I'm like "Dude, let it go. Have a little compassion here." I've never worried about people like the younger brother. If anything, I've had sympathy for them, because I think they have bought into a promise of self- fulfillment that can fulfill. It's like they watched a Mercedes Benz commercial and thought that buying a car and driving fast on a curvy coastal highway would actually make them happy. Or watched a beer commercial and actually believed getting buzzed with a bunch of beautiful friends was the key to a good life. When people like the little brother come to their senses and want to return to the real world, I'm like, good on you – welcome home!

And the father? It's tempting to put yourself in that role, but no. Remember I called this parable of the dysfunctional family? Well, although he seems to get it right at the end, how did he get one son who disowned him and took off for pleasure-land and another who silently stewed for years in his own self-righteous bitterness? No dad of the year awards here.

And what that does, it seems, is throw me back out of the story. It reminds me that I am not a character in this story, but a listener to it. In other words, I am a Pharisee. And so I have to think, what is it about them that is like me?

Well, the Pharisees wanted to figure out who's in and who's out. They had one way of figuring that out, based on their interpretation of law of Moses, and what they ended up doing, with the best of intentions, was putting ridiculous expectations on people. Do this, don't do that, tithe this, offer that – all indications are it just became too much. They made it too hard to follow God's way. And I am wondering now if I do the same thing. It's not, "don't drink, don't smoke, don't you dare watch Rachel Maddow." But it's more like, "put aside whatever qualms you might have about people are different from you. I'm not going to talk that out with you. Just get with the program." Or it's like, "Put aside whatever reservations you have about how people's short-term behavior affects the long-term nature of the whole community. Just live and let live. Sign this, protest that, and above all, feel guilty for everything."

Now, just to be clear. I do hope that others will end up doing all those things – celebrate people as they are, don't worry too much about behavior that actually doesn't hurt you even if you don't like it. I do hope that people will end up signing petitions and protesting injustice and maybe not feel guilty for everything, but surely for some things, things that we, collectively really ought not to have done, and we collectively should stop and repair.

But I think what Jesus is saying in this parable is that you can't start there. Maybe we are like the pharisees because we make following Jesus so difficult for people, including ourselves, when the truth is that God's love is like a big party, and there is no entry requirement, except that you are willing to welcome whoever comes, as they are. It's a feast, with the more the merrier. Everybody at the feast isn't going to get everything right – surely not the two sons – and none of the other guests either. But everyone gets to enjoy the feast, because it is not about repentance, or appreciation or moral qualification of the attendees, but about the joy and love of the father.

I didn't know we were going to do this, but we came pretty darn close to having a party earlier in this service, with the kids leading us in song, celebrating that we've got peace like river, joy like a fountain, love like an ocean, and faith like an anchor. That's what our party is about. That's what this celebration is about. And we lead with joy. We lead with celebration. We lead with love. And you know, people will come. Because once the party has begun, it's a beautiful thing.

So, remember Jesus, that brilliant rabbi and storyteller? He has put us on the outside, looking in at this parable, asking, "Will that older brother join the party?" Will we join the party, and welcome all?

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