

“All are welcome at God’s party” a sermon based on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 28 March 2022.

This parable is so rich in meaning that it has been given many names - the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the prodigal sons (plural), the parable of the waiting father. It is so rich in meaning that it has taken preachers in various directions.

There is the more straightforward meaning that sees us as people who get lost and come to our senses and are welcomed home by a forgiving God. It is a story of God’s unconditional love and prevenient grace, that God is a God who runs towards us even before we confess, to embrace us and throw us a party, enabling us to repent. We picked up that imagery in the first part of our service.

For those of us trained in the Reformed tradition of the twentieth century, it is hard to go around the interpretation by Karl Barth, the significant twentieth century theologian. He devotes many pages to the parable in his two volumes on the doctrine of reconciliation. Putting it too simply, Barth saw the Christ as identifying with the younger son, going to the far country in humiliation and suffering, to identify with us in our humanness, going to the far country to rescue lost humankind, and returning to the father in exaltation and homecoming, bringing humankind with him, reconciling humankind to God. It is a wonderfully rich exploration. Barth did not think the elder son was important in the story, but that is where I want to go this morning.

And I want to focus on the question that is left hanging - will the elder son go to the party?

There are parties we avoid, are there not? At present, most people are avoiding parties because of the risk of infection. Personally, I do not like parties where I might be expected to dance. Once the dancing starts, I am immediately called to meditate outside. Sometimes we cannot share the excitement of others or the way they express their excitement. And sometimes, we feel we won’t fit. The people at the party are so different from us that we cannot imagine ourselves being with them or they are so exuberant, we would prefer to be seated at another table. A slight echo here of Martha, the practical, faithful Martha who is not caught up in the approach of the differently spirited Mary. In different times and in different ways, we are the elder son.

The question remains - Will his attitude to his brother ever allow him to respond to his father’s pleading?

Luke is retelling part of the story of Israel, being sent into a far country, the story of a people uprooted, going into exile, losing their land. But they return, a return that is marked by jubilee, the comprehensive releasing of debt and the restoration of land and home. Luke is building on imagery from Hebrew Scripture about how God would relent from punishing God’s people and bring them home from exile.

For example, in Jeremiah: *Thus says the Lord ... they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country ... Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord ... Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities. (Jer 31.16-21)*

And from Hosea - *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. They shall return to the land of Egypt ... (Hosea 11.1-9)*

God is loving and merciful, like a compassionate parent, who delights in the return of the child who has wandered away. A retelling of the history of Israel, but Luke gives it a twist through the mouth of the elder son. He gives us a sign of what is coming by portraying the Pharisees as “moneylovers” even though there is no evidence that the Pharisees were especially greedy.

Let’s remember the story with the elder son in mind. The younger son returns and parties, but the elder son cannot bear that his no-good brother is welcomed back without any punishment at all, and refuses even to recognize him as family. The scene begins with the elder son “in the field”. He asks a worker what the ruckus is about, and is told “*Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.*” The son gets angry, and boycotts the party, a serious public insult to his father. The long-suffering parent pleads for his son to join him, a shameful concession that he has no control over his own son.

This leads to a petulant rant, shocking in its tone and message: *‘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!’ (15.29-30)*

Both sons are utterly self-absorbed, with no concern for the father or the family’s reputation. But the elder son’s speech reveals something key to Luke’s message. The elder son presents his life as a financial exchange: his years of work should have *earned* him a party with *his friends*. And note how he portrays his brother’s sin: not the disgrace of the family in the eyes of the neighbours, but the “consuming” of property! The son is concerned with the waste of resources that “belong” only to those who earn them through hard work. When he speaks of his own celebration, it is not with his family, or the local community or with his younger brother, but with his friends!

The father’s wants the elder son to see it all differently. He insists that the son share in the family bond: “*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.*” The father is looking to the elder son to “repent”! But the elder son is angry that a party is being thrown for someone who cannot be trusted with money.

Luke continues with this theme of wealth in the next chapter with a story about a manager who “was squandering”. That story ends with Jesus’ famous saying: “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” The Pharisees “turned their noses up at” Jesus for this saying.

The question here and throughout Luke isn’t “wealth versus poverty.” It is “my wealth” versus “God’s wealth *shared among all.*” Here is a parable that contradicts the view that people have to work for what they get. It contradicts the view that treats people who receive something free as not deserving it. It contradicts the view that our society should not provide for people who cannot earn for themselves. It contradicts all limitations on people participating in the abundance of God. It asks us to risk our own honour in reaching out to those our society regards as undeserving.

God pleads with us, pleads that we not let envy or resentment or an economic theory stop us from all experiencing God’s abundant life. “*My child*, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. We had to celebrate and rejoice ...”

*Note: I am grateful to **Wes Howard-Brook and Sue Ferguson Johnson** for their commentary on Luke 15, March 6, 2016 on the website [The Gospel of Luke – Radical Discipleship](#) .*

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