

Fourth Sunday in Lent

PARTY ON!

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Lent 4

Analysis by Jerome Burce

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable: 11 "There was a man who had two sons. 12 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. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 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. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 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! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." 20 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.

21 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.' 22 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. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 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.'"

Note: If readers of Robert Farrar Capon spot his fingerprints anywhere in the following, they're probably right. Capon plays incessantly with the idea of salvation as feast, banquet, and riotously good party. He rubs off.

DIAGNOSIS: “Get Lost, Old Man!”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Blowing the Pop Stand*

Two brothers, same problem: they want to whoop it up with their pals (v. 29) on the father’s dime though with the father so absent that he may as well be dead (v. 12: “Give me the share of the property that will come to me” = “Let’s make as if you’re buried and the will has been read.”) The sole difference between the two is that the younger has the unmitigated gall to say what’s on his mind (v. 12) and then to act on it (v. 13). The older, pseudo-righteous grind that he is, merely nurses the wish-for years and years (v. 29)! One thinks—unfairly? You be the judge-of today’s baptized sons and daughters, the post-high school/pre-married set firmly scratching the Father’s Sunday bash from the This-I-Do list. Meanwhile the married-with-kids crowd gathers oh so dutifully, (“for the children’s sake”), visions of the golf course dancing through their heads as the preacher drones on. Would they think to recommend what they’re sitting through to their golfing buddies? Not likely!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Pop as Party Pooper (They Said)*

Again two brothers, same underlying assumption: with the father there is no fun, only drudgery and the slavish grind of doing what you’re told. See the elder brother’s gripe (v. 29a). Ask too why Junior is so intent on the “distant country” (v. 13), or why, from the depths of the pig sty, he hopes for nothing higher than a peon’s ration (v. 17). Is this pathetic expectation rooted solely in the “I have sinned” and “am not worthy” of verses 18 and 19? How can it be when nothing has yet happened to change whatever impression drove him to run from dad in the first place? (That’s why the rehearsal of vv. 18-19 smacks less of honest confession than of a rascal’s ruse to land a few square meals). No, better we believe that Junior believes-with

big brother-that the words “dad” and “good times” have no business appearing in the same sentence. Lest we doubt this, ask when any of us last heard a married-with-kids type explain that he hauls those children to church to expose them to joy. To the rules for right living, grim and sober? For sure. But to joy? In church? With God-as-Dad? You’ve got to be kidding!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Party Pooped*

Two brothers, same dreadful discovery: the weird, who’d-a-thunk-it indulgence of Dad Almighty who lets the lads enact their dumb assumptions, each in his own deadly way. If the far country is what Junior wants the far country is exactly what Junior gets, pop-free partying to the point of dissolution (v. 13), the money spent (v. 14), his very life melting away in the pig-mucak (v. 16). As for big brother, swinishly pouting for a party of his own devising, pop may plead (v. 28). He won’t coerce. Note how the story ends (or rather, doesn’t). The father has stated his case (v. 32). Whether the son buys it remains up for grabs. Once dad heads back for the house, big brother’s field will be as pop-free as Junior’s far country was. If that’s what he opts for, that’s what he’ll get (compare 13:34c-35a). The upshot, inevitable and inescapable: the same fate that befell Junior and that also catches up with the God-less party hound of 16:19. Question: are our own twenty-somethings (and here and there our seventy-somethings) any more able than brothers Dumb and Dumber to imagine that God might be so mean as to let them have their way? (See also Paul’s “God gave them up” of Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

PROGNOSIS: “Welcome Home, Child!”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Prodigal Father, Prodigal Son*

Two brothers, same huge surprise: turns out that Divine Dad is even more intent than they are on whooping it up with wastrels, so long as—especially when—the wastrels in question are the boys

themselves. For such a party he himself “spent everything” (v. 14) to an extent that the present story merely hints at. At the real party fatted calf (v. 23) is but the appetizer. For entrŽe try Spotless Lamb, i.e. Jesus the storyteller, Beloved Boy (3:22) and True Elder Brother, prodigally dispatched to the farthest of far countries (devil’s turf, no less—4:1, 6, 33, et al.) not only to wallow with the pigs (15:2b, 19:5) but to squander his life for them. Note how he dies in a frenzy of dissolute forgiving, devouring the Father’s property not merely “with prostitutes” (v. 30) but with rank “criminals” (23:33); and even then not merely with those of the Junior variety who know what they are (v. 21; 23:40-43) but also-incredibly-with big brotherly types who haven’t got a clue (v. 29a; 23:34). More incredibly still: on the third day-more pointedly, “on the first day of the week at early dawn” (24:1)-the Father endorses the big splurge by raising this Jesus up (Acts 2:32). Wouldn’t you know, his first act of “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) is to throw a little party for Dumb and Dumber II at the Emmaus Inn (24:25, 29b-30). Of course the parties continue, week after week, always the same kind of dumb-brotherly guests, each the faintest foretaste of the Blast to Come.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Best Shindig in Town (They Said)

Two brothers, same invitation: to start whooping it up with “this [Other] brother of [ours Who for our sake] was dead and has come to life; [Who] was lost and is found” (v. 32). “This son of yours” (v. 30) runs the cosmic show these days (Acts 2:32) as “both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). As dad observes, the only sane reaction is “to celebrate and rejoice” (v. 32), which heaven certainly does (2:13-14), all the more so when dumb sinners repent (vv. 7, 10). To repent is to get with the present program of Holy Prodigality, endorsed by the Father, effected by the Son, induced and advanced by the intoxicating Spirit of both

(see Acts 2:13, 10:43-46a). Spirit? Think “life of the party” as in ultimate party, the kind that arises when God himself is at the heart and center of the festivities. There the party mood is eternal, never passing. Luke litters his two volumes with reports of sinners who blessedly succumbed to it. Many look like Junior, denizens of sty and far country. Shepherds come to mind (2:8-20). So does Zacchaeus (19:1-10). On occasion a big brother forsakes his pout and heads for the house. The prime example is the once grim Saul, so suddenly Paul (Acts 9), the apostle who caps his career with a party-goer’s hurrah: “Rejoice in the Lord. Again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4). Now here’s a thought: if God can get this guy to get it, will he not do the same with the dopey, dreary likes of us and the people we preach to?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Letting the Good Times Roll

Two brothers, same immediate mission: to head back to field and far country, there to introduce their party-minded pals to the Real Thing. Are we getting ahead of our story? A little, but not much. Remember who’s telling it: the Properly Prodigal Son, he with “the ends of the earth” on his mind (Ac. 1:8). “All that I have is yours,” says dad to big brother (v. 31), the implication being that he’s more than welcome to “celebrate with [his] friends” (v. 29). Indeed, dad encourages it. Check out those items—ring, robe, and sandals—he excitedly calls for when Junior comes home (v. 22). Party equipment? Tux, dancing shoe, and a little flash? To be sure. But cloak and sandals also serve to get one down the road again. As for the ring, think signet ring, the mark of ownership, or in modern terms the no-limit credit card for Junior to use with dad’s full faith and credit backing it up. [Note the story’s underlying marvel: Dad’s property, divided and spent (vv. 12b, 14a), is still somehow intact and as bottomless as ever—bread and to spare for the hired hands (v.

17), fattened calf for the party. Translation: the well of forgiveness never runs dry.] So what is Junior, freshly invested with the Father's stuff, to do with it? Answer: throw parties (14:12-14), and in the very place he blew it the first time, i.e. the far country, that region of "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (14:13) which suffers still from a famine of mercy (v. 16b) though also of wisdom, teeming as ever with dumb siblings who, even as they squander the common patrimony, are clueless as to what and where the Real Party is. Do we pout about their cluelessness? Not if we follow First Brother Jesus' lead (tellingly, 14:33). He "welcomes sinners," kid siblings all, "and eats with them" (v. 2b). Better still, he takes the party to them. The results have been astonishing (2:18 et al.; 19:8-9), and still are. Go thou, Junior. Older brother too. Do likewise (10:37).