

Fourth Sunday in Lent

WE HAD TO CELEBRATE

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Analysis by Paige G. Evers

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 11b So he told them this parable: "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 s on 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.'"

DIAGNOSIS: Wild Living Leads to Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Freedom?*

The younger son couldn't wait to get his hands on his inheritance. He couldn't even wait for his Father to die. So he demanded to have his share, now. It only took a few days for him to pack it all up and run far away from his Father, his older brother, and his home. Once he reached a distant country, he went wild. To all appearances, life was great. He had money, freedom, and friends galore. What more could he want? Meanwhile, back at home, the older brother received his share of the estate

also. But he didn't leave home. He stayed with his Father and fulfilled his duty. He never disobeyed his Father's command (v. 29). To all appearances, he was fine. He had nothing to complain about. But looks can be deceiving.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Famine!*

The fun didn't last long for the younger son. Once he'd wasted his inheritance in that distant country, he started wasting away as well. He found himself in a severe famine with no money, no food, and no family. He "began to be in need" (v. 14). It was a new experience, this need. Inside his body, he felt the effects of an empty stomach. Inside his heart, he felt the effects of his independence. His faith in his inheritance had been misplaced. He could no longer afford to be the carefree life of the party. His apparent freedom faded overnight. Now he was someone who had to hire himself out and feed another man's pigs. Even then, he was still hungry. The older brother was hungry as well. Not for food, but for justice. He may have been obedient to his Father, but his obedience was tinged with resentment. He "worked like a slave" (v. 29) for his Father and had very little to show for it, except the grudge eating away at his heart.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Forlorn*

Both sons show what happens when one turns away from one's heavenly Father. The older brother might have stayed at home with Dad, but his resentment was driving a wedge between them. He rejected his Father in his heart. Where did that leave the older son? Forsaken and alone. The younger son, on the other hand, living in that far-off country, knew that he was all alone. He would have eaten from the pig's trough, but "no one gave him anything" (v. 16). He had cut himself off from food, from his Father, from life itself.

PROGNOSIS: Wild Giving Leads to Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Found by the Father*

The Father is well aware of his sons' rejection of him, each in their own way. But while the younger son "was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion" (v. 20). Meanwhile the older son had a meltdown, claiming that the father never recognized his slave-like obedience; to this the father responds, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (v. 31). In his compassion, the Father doesn't give either son what they deserve for wild living or begrudging obedience. Instead, he throws a party. He spreads his arms wide and embraces his wayward younger son; he lovingly reminds his older son that he gives him everything too, holding nothing back. In the cross of Jesus Christ this same promise is given to all God's wayward children (sinners). All that Christ has is ours. In his death, we are made alive. In him, we who were once lost have been found (vv. 24 & 32).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faith in the Father*

The parable ends before we can hear what happens to the younger son's hungry heart and the older son's shriveled one. But now both sons can put their faith in someone who is more trustworthy than an inheritance and hard work. The younger son and his older brother have been reunited with their compassionate Father. He is in full celebration mode. His extravagance in the form of the best robe, a ring, sandals, and the fatted calf (v. 23) is enough to transform the toughest hearts.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *A Feast Thrown by the Father*

Life as a child of this Father offers true celebration, a party that "dissolute living" can't even touch (v. 13). Music,

dancing, eating and drinking (vv. 23 & 25) are the hallmarks of the celebration thrown by a compassionate Father for his regained children. But they're not the only ones who are invited. This feast is open to all. Those who were dead and who are now alive again continue the celebration by inviting others to return to their compassionate Father and to feast at his table. Through their invitation, more who were lost will be found and welcomed home.