

The Party of the Prodigal Brother (27Mar22)  
Luke15:1-3,11-35; 2Corinthians5:16-21

Some of you are skeptical, I know, as I try convincing you Lent isn't gloomily dismal. Particularly, I recall a young man raised in this congregation, Adam Schneider, a couple years ago in the MCC Facebook group, questioning my use of the greeting "happy Lent."

You may suspect I'm one small slip away from a serious transgression of letting loose a certain little word that begins with A- and ends -lleluia. In your sinful sorrow, you may be the sour, curmudgeonly sort who prefers a season of sadness and self-abasement. Or maybe you have just come to believe that Lent is supposed to be sullen, not with the spring of budding flowers and singing birds, but of the cold mucky soggy grayness we had this week.

Well, for a point in my Lent-isn't-sad column, here's the story from Jesus.

Even if you want to claim the younger son was repenting, still he doesn't get a full confession off his lips. His father doesn't put him on penitential probation, conditionally welcoming him back and offering to hold a special feast at Easter as long as he spends the next 40 days thinking about what he did.

Nor can we diminish this to say the father was simply relieved or glad the son had seen the error of his ways and come around. No, this is all out joy. He threw decorum out the window, and maybe himself out the window as he went sprinting off down the driveway, and he throws an all-out bash, a huge party. I'd only ever noticed the menu, that he says the special occasion requires the fatted calf; I'd never even noticed the music and dancing!

It makes me wonder: what if church were a party? Not just with a foretaste of the feast to come in communion but actually a banquet, and not even only the music we already appreciate but even with dancing. More to the point, why shouldn't we do it?! All just because you come back every time, and are worth the celebration. Imagine how different that would feel than a manner of Lenten thinking that you need to act rotten and remorseful when you come, that this is serious business and is

mostly focused around not feeling good enough about yourself.

Whether or not that's how you felt when you arrived today, we know we don't need to consign the prodigal to be others of our siblings, as if we're the really good ones and somebody else must be the bad one on the outs. Naw! You've been lost enough.

So welcome back! This is a party! Jesus is SO happy to see you! Delighted! Rejoicing! Caught off-guard and overwhelmed at how good it is, just that you showed up! As a representative of it, I should've run out to meet you in the parking lot. I wish I had robes and rings for you. I wish I had more than a sip of wine to offer, and wish we could feast together. I want you to feel toe-tappingly, shimmying boogieing dance-worthy about the whole thing!

Having given you that welcome, the welcome home, the welcome to your party, let's pause for a transition.

It seems our most frequent reaction to this story from Jesus is, indeed, to see ourselves as one son or the other, either repentant or resentful, either young and foolish or self-righteous about our hard work. This either/or fractures in estrangement. In the story, the term father is used 13 times, and son 10 times, often almost layered to emphasize the relationships. The word brother appears just twice, neither time to refer to each other. Finally the father has to say, "This is your brother we're talking about!"

So against the divisiveness, I again suggest that you are both. Regardless of which brother you identify with more. As soon as you come in to worship, you are a prodigal son or daughter or child of God welcomed back with an embrace and the most joyous hoorays and—again, if we did it right and well as church—dancing and feasting.

Then you go out from the party, and the question becomes how you'll react as the older sibling.

I'd say that Paul in our beautiful passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians has great language for this. He calls you ambassadors as you are sent out. You've been welcomed home here, to your home turf. You enter the homecoming party and then go out from this

embassy. We might describe it that, as ambassadors, you go out to tell others there's a party, a celebration, that God isn't counting trespasses or expecting groveling, but is rushing to find the lost and bring them home for new beginnings in life.

Paul says it's about reconciling. Maybe we can realize that's not to reconcile them as sinners, but to ourselves to be reconciled with them by seeing they are supposed to be at this party, too, together, and to acknowledge that we are brothers, sisters, siblings.