

“And They Began to Celebrate”
Luke 15:11b-32
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One of the things which distinguishes Protestantism from its Roman Catholic past is that it recognizes two, rather than seven, sacraments — The Lord’s Supper, or Communion, which we generally celebrate once a month, and Baptism, which we celebrate as often as the need arises. In our Protestant traditions, the other five acts which the Roman church considers sacramental, such as weddings, and ordinations and the rest, we also perform, though not with the same understanding. One of the reasons the Reformers discarded the other five is that they felt they could not be justified biblically since Jesus neither performed them nor commanded us to do them. This understanding of the need for biblical precedent does however, leave the door open for at least suggesting other sacraments, and there are those throughout the history of the church who have suggested that footwashing, for example, be elevated to the level of sacrament since Jesus not only washed the feet of the disciples but in so doing commanded them to love and serve one another. Though unlikely to happen, contemplating the character of an action like that can, at the very least, be quite fruitful spiritually. This evening, I’d like to suggest yet another possible sacrament, the seeds of which are contained in the Gospel lesson, the story of the so-called “Prodigal Son,” perhaps more appropriately titled the story of “A Man and His Two Immature

Sons.” You see, in this parable, is an act that is both utterly sacramental in its character *and* worthy of us to consider as a way to be toward one another. I am referring of course to the part of the story in which the Father runs out to meet his returning son. And so, if you will bear with me as I offer some background on what I *would* call “The Sacrament of Running Welcome,” I hope you will find it too to be an endeavor spiritually fruitful.

The parable of “A Man and His Two Sons” is both famous and beloved for a number of reasons. First of all, it is simply one heck of a good story with the obvious action and drama, but also with suspense, as we get to the end and are left hanging as the older son contemplates his response to the Father’s expression of love. It is also the story of a family, and of a family business, and of family conflict, the stuff of which decades of soap operas have been made. You’ve seen these characters on “As the Stomach Churns”...I mean, “As the World Turns.” As a result, most of us are likely to see ourselves somewhere in the story, perhaps as prodigals squandering our wealth and losing our way, perhaps as responsible eldest children sacrificing for the sake of the family, perhaps as parents of children who strike out on their own and about whom we worry. It is a story in which we may see ourselves in more than one of the roles, over the course of a lifetime. It is a poignant, tragic, and beautiful story of a family.

But the reason, perhaps, that it has achieved the status it has among the stories of Jesus is because it so wonderfully reveals something about God’s

character, a quality we so much long to experience and which seems, at least in these times, to be so absent from our daily lives. You see, it illustrates for us the depth of God's willingness to welcome us and to accept us, no matter who we are or what we've done. It gives us a profound sense of what it means to belong and to have a place in a family, a place to which we can return, a place we can call home.

But as wonderful as that revelation is in the reading of the parable, it is only a surface meaning. Our distance in years and miles from Jesus' time means that the teaching of the parable is even more amazing when we are able to hear it more like those who would have heard Jesus tell it the first time. If we would have heard Jesus tell this parable, we would be shocked at what the younger son implies by asking for his portion of the estate. We would know that he has publicly stated his preference for his father to be dead. We would be shocked at the insult of the older son whose standard role it was to be the steward of the food and drink at his father's party. We would know that his refusal to enter in to the house made his father look weak and disgraced in the eyes of all the guests. What's more, we would know that the father does what no father like him in his time would do — he physically runs! To do so, this wealthy man would have had to gather up his expensive robes, expose his bare legs, and do what he normally commanded his servants to do: to run out and welcome the guest, indeed, the very son who had preferred him dead. But instead, he himself gets up and runs, incurring both the amusement and scorn of the other villagers who would think him either crazy or

pathetic. And if that humiliation were not enough, though gladly suffered to greet his lost son, the father endures it again when he leaves his guests to attend to his elder son's distress. Now, it was considered very bad form to leave one's guests, especially to deal with an insolent son. Yet, he rises from his place and makes sure the son knows he has a place in his father's house.

Friends, it does not take a great amount of insight to know that the Father in Jesus' parable is God. What challenges us is to think about our God who has not remained cloaked in utter mystery, or shielded from view by immense power, but who has demonstrated an willingness, nay, an eagerness to run out to meet a lost son or daughter, to defy social convention to reclaim an embittered child, to accept without question those who return though they wished them dead, to declare undying loyalty to the faithful who stay even if they are a little surly — this is the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who was willing to be humiliated, to be countercultural, so that we might too find a place in the household of God, to know what it is to belong and to find community. There is profound grace in this story, and we are grateful for its telling.

The telling of the Biblical story and its exploration in a sermon are one of the two ways that our Protestant traditions have historically understood God's Word to be revealed. The other way is in the celebration of the sacraments. We understand the Bible and the sermon to be God's Word preached, and the sacraments to be God's Word enacted, and in both of these ways, the grace of God

is revealed. The reason I have suggested that we consider a new sacrament is that the picture I have of the Father running out to meet his son is God's Word enacted. When we celebrate the sacraments, we are experiencing, beyond words, the grace that is operating in our lives through Jesus Christ. A Sacrament of Running Welcome, which I suggest we might celebrate upon receiving new members in the life of the church, would enact the grace of God which has brought us together at this particular time and this particular place. Perhaps in such a sacrament, just as we do when we use water in baptism or break bread at Communion, we would give visible witness to God's grace by running down the aisle and embracing those newly come to us. And then, in the words of the parable, we would kill the fatted calf and begin to celebrate! Yeah!

But not so fast. It is still Lent, after all. We must be solemn, and austere, and keep the fast. Well, although that is technically untrue, and I'll tell you why, it is still a good idea to put the celebration on hold until Easter. As I've probably mentioned before, if you count the number of days between Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, and Easter, you get more than 40 days, forty-six in fact, and the truth is that there are six Sundays during Lent, even though there are not six Sundays of Lent, and that is because the Sundays don't count. You see, Sundays are always feast days, days we celebrate Christ's resurrection and victory over death. You couldn't possibly fast on a day like that, celebrating something like that. Why, I'll bet the prodigal son came home on a Sunday! But I'll also bet that

that same son was gone on his journey for about forty days, forty days of Monday through Saturday, forty days during which his father suffered the uncomfortable absence of his younger son, and forty days during which the elder brother shouldered the uncomfortable burden of being the son who stayed. And if, as they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder, at least for the father, those forty days were worth the wait. Yes, that story is about God, and about God's character, and we don't really think God's character changes, not in forty days, not in forty million years. But the story is also about us, about how we are called to conform to that wonderful image of God's character, no matter how imperfectly we do it.

And so when we put ourselves back into that soap opera story of family, we might imagine that as his son walked through the gate with his back toward his past, striking out into an unknown future, his father's anger and disappointment might have raged, and he wouldn't have received him even if he'd turned around and apologized just a kilometer down the road. But we might also imagine that as each uncomfortable day passed, as he journeyed through those forty days, no matter how many days there really were, the father's heart softened, remembering how he himself was created in the image of God, how he himself was loved, so that when the time came, there was a sufficient well of grace to draw from when he saw that son's image in the distance, enough grace that he would bear the discomfort of public humiliation, not just once when he ran to greet the younger

son, but a second time as well, when he left his seat at the table to implore the other brother to return to the table.

Yes, even though we are called to celebrate the good news of the Gospel every day, and on the Sundays in Lent, and maybe even with a new Sacrament of Running Welcome on certain days, there is also still a place to remember how long it took us to recognize God's grace in our lives, and how easy it is to forget that grace, and how hard it can be to accept that grace. Grace itself can be an uncomfortable burden; just ask the older son. Forty days weren't enough for him, and maybe they are not enough for us either. Maybe that's why there is Lent every year! But at least for this year, let us take advantage of the discomfort of these forty days to experience anew God's grace in Jesus Christ, who always runs out to meet us when we return from our journey. Amen.