

Luke 15:11-32

11 Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for 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. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.’ ’

How's the Party Going?

When I hear this Parable of the Prodigal Son, I immediately wonder how the party is going. You have the one son, the one we call the Prodigal Son, who is the reason for the celebration, you have the indignant older son, pouting outside, and you have the Father who's trying to persuade the older son to join the celebration, and I can't help but wonder how it all turns out. The father has thrown a party – he's killed the fatted calf – and he is celebrating and rejoicing at the homecoming of his younger son, but ends up going outside to meet the older son and beckon him to rejoice and celebrate. You have to wonder how the party went. And I think we should ask ourselves how our party is going.

The reason for the celebration is clear enough; the “lost” son has returned. He was dead, and now is alive. To think of this in terms of our own spiritual walk, the celebration

is all about us ending our separation from God, coming back into a relationship with God, and re-joining the family. But does the younger son really want to be at the party? You might say, "That's a no-brainer; the Father welcomes you back and rejoices at your return." But this parable tells us nothing about the mindset of that returning son, except that he was hungry and willing to work for his Father as a hired hand just to fill his belly. He may be thankful to have his belly filled with barbecued beef at the party, *but how long will he be thankful?* Once he starts working in the fields again, will he start reminiscing about the life he lived far away from his father? Once the famine is over and he's saved up a little money will he leave again? Will he go back to that foreign land when the food there is plentiful and start living the way he did before? There are lots of people who have been saved from certain demise by the grace of God and the kindness of a loving community who nonetheless go right back to their old way of life once their wounds are healed and the bellies are full. And there plenty of people who come by the church for a visit every now and then but rather than stick around long enough to party here they go off to some foreign land and party there. Though they might come here when they are down and out to be reminded of God's love and acceptance, they would rather not be considered part of the family. How joyful are you to be here, and do you want to stay?

And then there's the older son, the one who refuses to join the party because he considers the Father too gracious. And the question is, *does the older son ever really feel that he is part of the family?* Sure he's remained at home, but has he been happy about it? He tells his dad, "I have been working like a slave for you." He doesn't sound at all happy about being at home. And I wonder, if the father did persuade him to join the party, would he be at all happy there? There are people who work for God who are not at all happy about it and who resent it when those who work less get more attention. They may come to church faithfully week after week, and when someone who hasn't been there in years decides to show up one Sunday and that person becomes the center of attention, they feel slighted. They have the mindset of the older son. To use fancy jargon, they hold a **transactional** relationship with God rather than a loving relationship with him; they think that God rewards us based on the amount of work we do, and so they engage in the work without joy. They're not motivated by love of either God or of their fellow human being, and it shows in their attitudes, and no, I don't think they have much fun at parties. They wonder why the host invited that person, and perhaps they would leave the party if they have a chance.

To truly enjoy the party, you have to really want to be part of the family, and if you really want to be part of the family you are happy to work for the Father. I'd like to share another parable based on a parable that I first read in a sermon given by Rev. William Flippin Jr. Once upon a time there was a kite, a strong, beautifully-crafted kite. The kite used to enjoy flying so high in the sky, watching the birds and the clouds and the people and the trees below. But the kite grew discontented. Instead of feeling exhilarated flying in the sky, and looking at all the beauty surrounding it, it began to focus on the string that ran from it's very center to the kite master, and the kite complained, "This string is like a chain; it enslaves me to that kite master. It's not fair that I should be held back by this master. I want to be free of this string to soar higher and go farther. One day the

kite got its wish; the string broke, allowing the kite to be swept up by the wind and soar freely, for a few seconds. But of course without anyone to control the kite it soon came crashing down to the ground. Fortunately the owner saw where it crashed and ran to retrieve it, repaired it, and soon started to fly the kite once again. THE END.

Now I want you to think about my little kite parable in terms of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the kite represents both the brothers in Jesus' parable. When the kite starts to regard the string that connects it to its master as a hindrance, it's thinking like the older son in Jesus' parable; he resents the bond that ties him to the father. "I've stayed and slaved for you, but this wicked son of yours went out and spent his wasted inheritance living in the fast lane. Are there Christians out there who think that the Christian life is all about staying on the straight path, obeying all the rules, and doing a lot of work for God who resent those who are not working for God but who themselves feel like God's slaves? I dare say there are those who see their relationship with God as one of obligation, who see that string that runs from their heart to the heart of God as a hindrance but resent anyone who is not so hindered.

Are there Christians out there who have cut the string in pursuit of their own leisure and pleasure, who think that they can live their lives free of church, free of prayer, free of any steady connection with God or with their fellow Christians? Sure there are, but without that string connecting them to God they are bound to crash one day. We need to be connected to the kite master or we most certainly will come crashing down to the ground. You cannot expect to be a nominal Christian (i.e. a Christian by name only) and not eventually find yourself flailing around and possibly crashing.

Because we need that connection with God, and we have to appreciate that connection with God, and know that only through that connection with God can we find true joy and peace in the company of God and others.