

SHARING THE FATHER'S WELCOME

(Luke 15:11-32)

AMERICANS HAVE TAKEN to hanging up yellow ribbons along with the red, white, and blue. It all began at the outset of Ronald Reagan's presidency, when the hostages were released from Iran. They were welcomed with yellow ribbons fluttering from trees and utility poles in Washington, D.C., and on Main Street U.S.A. The image came from a popular ballad about a wife signaling a welcome to her husband, just released from jail, by tying a yellow ribbon "round the old oak tree." The song has mercifully faded, but the symbol has caught on. The yellow ribbon has become our sign of a joyful welcome home.

One of the stories that Jesus told gives us the picture of a yellow ribbon tied across the open gate of heaven. Jesus described the joy of heaven in welcoming home a penitent sinner. The familiar story is often called the parable of the prodigal son. Some have said it might better be called the parable of the elder brother, since it ends with his reaction to his brother's homecoming. But the central figure in the story is the father, who would welcome both sons to his feast. Jesus tells the story so that we might understand the welcome of his heavenly Father and join in its joy.

In the first part of his story, Jesus shows the *grace* of the Father's welcome; in the second part he tells us about the *demand* of that welcome.

THE GRACE OF THE FATHER'S WELCOME

The story begins with the younger of two brothers. This youth is living at home and hating every minute of it. Everything turns him off: the household, the farming, the lifestyle of his father. There is only one thing about his father that he does like: the old man's money. But the prospects of cashing in on it are remote. His father shows no sign of an early decease. At last the young man's patience runs out. "Father," he says, "give me what's coming to me from your estate."

It would be a rude demand in any society; it was especially harsh in view of the Old Testament laws of inheritance. Jewish wisdom, too, advised fathers against dividing their holdings before the day of their death: "For it is better that your children ask of you than that you should look to the hand of your sons" (Ecclesiasticus 33:22). But the father does what his younger son asks. He divides his estate. The young man finds himself holding title to at least a third, perhaps half, of his father's living. He gathers it all together. That is, he converts it into cash, so that he can put it in a bag and pull the string around it. Now he has what he has always wanted. He can go where he wants and do what he wants.

He does.

He leaves home at once; every step is a step into freedom, so he keeps on traveling. With a world of distance between him and his father's house he can live a little.

In the Sunday school of my childhood there were varnished oak chairs set in circles and pictures on the painted walls. They were all Sunday school pictures. In the basement, though, behind a door to a corridor, there was an engraving that didn't look like a Sunday school picture at all. It showed the prodigal son at a party. Some party. It didn't occur to me when I peered at the picture, but no doubt the prodigal picked up the tab.

In his story, Jesus does not give any details as to how the prodigal spent his money. Did months or years pass before his high living had to be scaled down? Did his funds evaporate in a rush, or did

he ration sin on a budget? In any case, at last it was no more a question of the cheapest wineshops or the cheapest women. It was the question of a crust of bread. The prodigal was penniless just as a famine struck the country, inflating the price of food. His wasted inheritance had bought him no friends. He had to get a job if he were not to starve, and the only job he could get was as a swineherd, feeding pigs. The point is not that feeding pigs is a messy occupation. The point is that pigs are an unclean animal in the technical sense of Old Testament law. Every bond with his father's house was broken. The prodigal was an alien, far from home, estranged, lost, unclean.

The prodigal's repentance is not glamorized in the parable. It began not in the depths of his heart but in the pit of his stomach. He watched the pigs crunch the dry carob pods that he fed them. His meager earnings could not provide him with daily bread, especially at famine prices. Perhaps he could manage carob pods. They were, after all, edible. How hungry he was! What meals he used to enjoy! His mind went back, not to the luxurious banquets that had cost him his inheritance, but to the dinners in his father's house. His father's house! "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!" (Luke 15:17, NIV).

Yes, he had said it aloud. It was true. He had been a fool, and a wicked fool at that. "He who keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father" (Prov. 28:7, NIV). He had to go home. He had to face his father again. What could he say? "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (Luke 15:18-19, NIV).

His father would take him in and give him employment and food. He was sure of it. He had no right to claim the old relationship, but he could see again his father's face.

The prodigal's confession of his complete unworthiness prepares us to marvel at his father's mercy and the grace of his welcome.

We may gain fresh amazement if we compare the story Jesus told with a somewhat similar story in the literature of Mahayana

Buddhism. In a famous “Lotus Sutra” the story is told.¹ A young man leaves his father’s house and is gone for many years, “twenty or thirty or forty or fifty.” His father searches for him and moves to another country, where he becomes immensely wealthy. The son, on the other hand, continues his wanderings as a despised beggar. One day the son happens to come to the town where his father lives. He does not recognize his father, but stares with curiosity at the princely magnificence of this elderly man. Fanned by attendants, the father sits on a throne under a jeweled awning, his footstool decorated in gold and silver. He is concluding business deals in gold bullion, corn, and grain with a surrounding crowd of merchants and bankers. The beggar is thoroughly alarmed. “People like me don’t belong here,” he thinks. “Let me get out of here before I am seized to do forced labor.”

But the father has recognized his son at first sight and sends his servants after him. They bring him back, kicking and screaming in terror. Sure that he will be put to death, he faints dead away. The father sprinkles cold water on him, and tells the servants to let him go. He does not identify himself to his son, or his son to his servants. Instead, he sends servants to find him again in the slum section of the city, and to bring him back with an offer of employment. The servants disguise themselves as street people, smearing dirt on themselves and wearing rags, so as to gain the trust of this beggar. Their mission succeeds, and the poor man is set to work at the lowliest of tasks. (The estate is not equipped with septic tanks.) The father watches his son through a window as he is shoveling manure, or, rather, basketing it. He, too, smears on dirt and puts on rags so as to go and talk to his son and encourage him on the job. The son works faithfully on the grounds, but continues to live in a shack nearby. Many years later, the father expresses great appreciation for the son’s faithful work; he declares that he will treat him as a son and make him his heir. The son is indifferent to all the wealth that is now declared to be his; he continues to live in his shack and work on the estate.

After some twenty years, “the householder perceives that his son

¹ Chapter 4 of the *Saddharma-Pundarika*, ed. F. Max Mueller, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 21 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 98-117.

is able to save, mature and mentally developed; that in the consciousness of his nobility he feels abashed, ashamed, disgusted, when thinking of his former poverty." Aware of his approaching death, the householder calls his relatives, officials, and neighbors, and declares before them all, "This man is my natural son, the heir of all that I possess."

The moral at the end of the story is that "as we have always observed the moral precepts under the rule of the Knower of the world, we now receive the fruit of that morality which we have formerly practised."

What is the difference between these two stories? One word describes it: *grace!* Amazing grace! Watch the father in the parable told by Jesus. Far down the road he sees that familiar figure. He sweeps up the skirt of his robe, thrusts it into his belt, and runs down the road to meet his son. He flings his arms around him, hugs him to his chest, and kisses the dusty cheeks of that swineherd. "Father," the son begins, "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son . . ."

The father will not hear more. Turning back to the house with his arm around his son, he is calling to the servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:22-24, NIV).

So full and free is the forgiveness of the father that he will have no delay in restoring to his son the symbols of his status. The best robe is a symbol of honor; the signet ring bears the father's seal; even sandals carry meaning—servants went barefoot. And then the feast! What a welcome!

Where is the father's prudence? Didn't the younger son disgrace his name? What has the man been doing? What of those rumors? What does he expect now, more money?

No, the father does not arraign his son with questions; he welcomes him in the triumph of joy. His son was dead, and is alive; was lost, and is found. The father's joy is kindled by the fire of his love.

The Scripture often pictures the love of a father: Abraham taking his beloved son Isaac up Mount Moriah. Must he, indeed, offer him up in sacrifice there?

Old Israel had been shown the blood-stained coat of Joseph, his favorite son, and had given him up for dead, the prey of some wild beast. Then he learned that Joseph, sold as a slave by his brothers, was a prince of Egypt. He went down to Egypt and was met on the way by Joseph. His son, whom his grief had counted to be dead, was alive in his arms.

King David was a poor father, by turns too strict and too indulgent, but he loved his rebellious son Absalom desperately. When the great battle was fought between the forces of David and Absalom, the king seemed less concerned about the outcome than about the safety of his son. When the messenger of victory confirmed that Absalom was dead, David wept, “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33, NIV).

Yet the greatest cry of a father’s love in the Old Testament comes not from David but from his God. The Lord had owned the people of Israel as his son in Egypt. His demand to Pharaoh was, “Let my son go, so he may worship me” (Ex. 4:23, NIV). The Lord guided his first-born son through the desert, as a father might teach an infant son to walk (Hos. 11:1-4). When Israel became a rebellious son, God pronounced his judgments on their apostasy. Yet from his heart of love he cried out,

“How can I give you up, Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, Israel? . . .
 My heart is changed within me;
 all my compassion is aroused” (Hos. 11:8, NIV).

THE DEMAND OF THE FATHER’S WELCOME

The scene shifts. We are out in the field as the furrows fall into shadow. The older brother is coming in from his work. As he nears the house, he listens and looks up. Yes, it’s music, the music of a band

playing. The house is blazing with light. There is singing, dancing; the whole hilltop is rocking. He calls to one of the hands. "What," he asks, "is going on up there?"

We have the feeling that he knows very well what is going on. There hasn't been a party like this since before his brother left home! The servant answers, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound" (Luke 15:27, NIV).

The older brother flings down his staff, folds his arms, and begins a slow burn. A celebration, indeed! He's not too surprised that the prodigal has shown up, but what has he done to deserve this? He should be flogged rather than feted! The brother is disgusted at his father's behavior. *At least he can't expect me to celebrate*, he thinks. *After all, the property has been divided, and what remains is mine: that best robe, that signet ring, and most particularly that sleek calf saved for a great feast.*

He despises the father's joy, is made furious by his grace, and resents his love for the prodigal.

The servant takes the news to the father. His older son is stalking about in the field, furiously angry, and refuses to come in to the feast. The father quickly leaves the feast; he goes down the path the second time to call his older son home. Clearly the older brother in the story images the Pharisees, Jesus' self-righteous opponents. In the preceding chapter of Luke another parable issues a stern warning to them. They are like guests who refuse an invitation to a banquet. The offended host sends his servant to bring in other guests from the streets and alleys of the town and from the highways and byways of the country. Every seat will be filled with the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. There will be no room any longer for the invited guests.

The Pharisees despise the poor and disdain Christ's call to the feast of the kingdom. They are warned that others will be seated at heaven's feast, and they will find themselves forever excluded. But in this parable, Jesus still holds the door open for the Pharisees. They are standing outside, furious because Jesus is celebrating with publicans and sinners. But Jesus says the Father still comes down the path

to call to them. Let them consider what it means if they reject his call, if they refuse to come in to the feast of glory.

The father pleads with his older son to come in to the banquet. He receives a bitter response: “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” (Luke 15:29-30, NIV).

That bitter son is farther from home there in the field than the prodigal was in the pigpen. He has no love for his father. Keeping his father’s orders is drudgery; working for him is slavery. His real pleasure is not with his father; like the prodigal at the beginning of the story, he would prefer celebrations with his own friends. He has no conception of his father’s love—for his brother, or for him. He has no love for his brother, either. He will not call him “my brother” but only “this son of yours.”

The father’s rebuke is gentle: “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:31-32, NIV).

The tenderness is there. Did it mean nothing to the older son that he was ever with the father? Was his relation with his father really that of a slave? Did he begrudge a fatted calf when the whole inheritance was his? Did he care nothing that his brother was not dead but alive?

Yes, the rebuke is tender, but the demand is clear. If he is indeed a true son of the father, he must come in to the feast. He cannot remain there in the outer darkness, burning with anger and jealous rage.

Suppose the older brother had indeed known his father’s heart. What would he have done? Surely he would have come running into the house when he was told that his brother had returned. Might he have done more? Well, if he had really shared his father’s feelings, he, too, would have been looking for his brother. Perhaps, being already out in the field, he might have seen him first and gone running to meet him. Could he have done more?

During the war in Vietnam, Army Lieutenant Daniel Dawson's reconnaissance plane went down over the Vietcong jungle. When his brother Donald heard the report, he sold everything he had, left his wife with \$20, and bought passage to Vietnam. There he equipped himself with a soldier's gear and wandered through the guerilla-controlled jungle, looking for his brother. He carried leaflets picturing the plane and describing in Vietnamese the reward for news of the missing pilot. He became known as *Anh toi phi-cong*—the brother of the pilot. A *Life* magazine reporter described his perilous search.²

Yes, the older brother could have done more. If he had really cared, he could have done what Donald Dawson did. He could have gone to the far country, looking for his brother. Indeed, this is not an idle suggestion, for it is at the heart of the parable. This parable is one of three that Jesus told in Luke 15, all in response to the bitter criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus was surrounded by tax collectors and sinners, eager to hear his teaching. The Pharisees muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2, NIV).

Jesus replied with the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Each story ends with a joyful feast to celebrate the finding of what had been lost. The shepherd calls his friends to a party because he has found his sheep. The woman invites her friends because she has found her lost coin. The father celebrates the recovery of his lost son, and calls the older brother to join in the joy. Jesus is teaching that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. But he is also contrasting his ministry with the attitude of his critics. They complain because he associates with sinners. He replies that he seeks sinners because his Father does. Jesus is pictured in the shepherd, who seeks the one sheep that is lost. He is pictured, too, in the woman who sweeps her house seeking the coin that was lost. Jesus does not appear, however, in the parable of the prodigal son. Instead, he steps out of the story and puts in his place the figure of the Pharisees. The older brother is doing just what they were doing:

²"A Haunted Man's Perilous Search," *Life*, March 12, 1965.

refusing to associate with sinners. Jesus is doing the opposite. He understands his Father's heart of mercy. He is not only willing to go in with sinners to heaven's feast; far more, he has come to look for sinners where they are. He has come to seek and to save that which is lost. He seeks out tax collectors, stopping under the sycamore-fig tree to call Zacchaeus down, and inviting himself to his house. He finds a fallen woman by a well in Samaria, and speaks forgiveness to a murderer crucified with him.

We do not understand this parable if we forget who told it, and why. Jesus Christ is our older Brother, the firstborn of the Father. He is the seeking Shepherd who goes out to find the lost; he is the Resurrection and the Life who can give life to the dead; he is the Heir of the Father's house. To him the Father can truly say, "Son, all that I have is yours." He who is the Son became a Servant that we might be made the sons and daughters of God. This parable is incomplete if we forget that our older brother is not a Pharisee but Jesus. He does not merely welcome us home as the brother did not; he comes to find us in the pigpen, puts his arms around us, and says, "Come home!"

Indeed, if we forget Jesus, we do not grasp the full measure of the Father's love. The heavenly Father is not permissive toward sin. He is a holy God; the penalty of sin must be paid. The glory of amazing grace is that Jesus can welcome sinners because he died for them. Jesus not only comes to the feast, eating with redeemed publicans and sinners; he spreads the feast, for he calls us to the table of his broken body and shed blood.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus sings God's praise in the midst of his brethren (Heb. 2:12).³ The joy of heaven's feast is already anticipated in the fellowship of the singing Savior. Jesus knows his Father's heart, and rejoices with him. Full of joy through the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and

³ Not only is the cry of abandonment at the beginning of Psalm 22 fulfilled by Jesus, the cry of victory in verse 22 of that psalm is also his. The author of Hebrews ascribes it to him in this passage.

learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure” (Luke 10:21, NIV).

Come home to the Father’s love, to the joy of Jesus’ feast. Are you a prodigal, far from the gate of heaven? Jesus now comes to lift you up. Are you a smug Pharisee, flaunting the filthy rags of your self-righteousness outside the Father’s house? Hear the words of Jesus: his Father calls you to repent and come home as a little child. Or are you somehow both at once: prodigal and proud, debased but despising? No matter; cast all away and hold fast to Jesus.

Or are you a believer? Has Jesus found you like the lost sheep and borne you home on his shoulder? Then consider the demand this parable puts on you. You have tasted of heaven’s grace. You know the embrace of your Father’s love. You know that he rejoices over you with singing. What does heaven’s joy, his joy, over lost sinners mean to you?

You say, “It means that I, too, must welcome sinners, be ready to eat with them, even as I have been brought to his table.” Is that enough? The true Son, who knows his Father’s heart, did not simply share with sinners his robe, his ring, his sandals. He went to find them to bring them home. Where will you look today?

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8, NIV).