***“We Had to Celebrate”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, 3-31-19

**Luke 15:11–32**

Jesus said, There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. 13The younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a far country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country. 15So he 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 then he came to himself and 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 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 the best robe 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 asked one of the slaves what was going on. 27He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf. . . .” 28 He became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pled with him. 29But he answered, “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.”

Of course, this is the parable of the Prodigal Son, and it’s full of interesting details. Also, it helps to know something about the ancient world, where fathers had status and honor, while sons were supposed to be subservient and respectful. We still have some of that today, but those rules were more strict in the ancient world.

The very first act of disrespect is when the younger son asks for his inheritance. That is rude and selfish, and might mean that the son will act as though his father were already dead. But the father doesn’t react in any way; he just gives the boy his inheritance. Of course, the son goes and wastes it on dissolute living. The word translated “dissolute” really means “reckless.” So we don’t get any details here. It is the son’s brother, near the end of the parable, who says his brother was spending it on prostitutes, but the narrator does not say that.

What we do get is a tale of a foolish young man who gets stuck in poverty and shame, a Jewish guy who is reduced to feeding pigs. That’s the height of shame. Notice how he plans his repentance speech. He seems to be memorizing it. It’s got an apology in it, even a self-humiliation: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (15:19), and a plea to be taken in at the lowest place, as a hired hand.

He returns to his home country and approaches his father’s house, possibly rehearsing his speech. Dad sees him coming from a long way off and *runs* out to meet him. This would be shocking to Jesus’ audience. It would be considered inconsistent with fatherly authority and status. The father embraces his son, who launches into his speech, and gives about two thirds of it, but dad doesn’t even want to hear it. Instead he orders the servants to bring out the best robe, and a ring, and sandals, and to kill the fatted calf for a celebration. The father does not need to hear the repentant speech. He is shockingly forgiving and unconcerned with his own dignity and power. All he cares about his getting his son back. “We had to celebrate,” he says (15:32).

Jesus is presenting an image of God as extraordinarily forgiving and loving, not at all the disciplinarian, the rule-giver, the putter of people in their place, that people expected, and that many people still expect today. This story is a deliberate slap in the face of that somber concept of God as a hyper-*controlling* authority figure, concerned about proper order and submission. Well, that *is* a concept of God you can find in the Bible, but Jesus is chucking it right out the window and emphasizing the intense love of God, and his love of a good celebration, too.

Now there’s a considerable amount of humor in this parable, but the lesson is still a serious one. I think the *truly* lost son is the proud and judgmental one who refuses to celebrate. After all, he is showing disrespect for his father when he refuses to celebrate, as the father commanded. The brother is a judger, a finger-wagger, and a joy killer. He will not cooperate with his father, even though the latter came out and pled with him (15:28). Do you see how this is worse than the youthful bad judgment of his brother? He *ought* to be the more mature one, the more forgiving one, but he is not. The younger brother, despite his mistakes, comes around. He has a repentant attitude. The older brother won’t budge, and he has a superior attitude.

Of course, the parable is not meant to excuse irresponsibility. The story doesn’t work at all if the younger brother’s repentance is insincere, if he’s pretending, or cynically manipulating the dad. It only works if the young man is truly sorry, and just wishes to live with his father once again. The lessons in the story only work if we assume the young man is honest.

What you have, then, is an honest and repentant young fool who has decided to stop being foolish, and an older and arrogant son who is honestly conceited and no fun at a party. The lesson for *us* is to stop being foolish, *and* to stop being arrogant. Guess which vice is very common among religious people? It is arrogance, feelings of moral superiority, such as the Pharisees had. We say Prayers of Confession every Sunday to target *our* feelings of superiority. I remove some of the more negative parts from these prayers, but I accept the idea that we can be tempted toward smugness, and that we should pray about it. Don’t be like the smug brother. And don’t refuse the command to come in and join the celebration. We have such a generous father, it should be easy to do!