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There Shall Only Be One Party

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ So he told them this parable:

[The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother]

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The 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. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But 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! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

²⁰ So 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. ²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But 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.

²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for 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. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!

³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

³² But 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.’”

The heart of the parable is this: there were two men, both of whom thought, felt, spoke, and behaved as if they were slaves to a malevolent master, but who were, in fact, brothers to one another and sons of the same loving, generous father. Of all it means on any given day, the Parable of the Prodigal Son says to me – in days like these – that we are, each and every one, children of the same God, brother and sister to every other human being on the planet.

We may think, feel, speak and behave otherwise, as much as we want. But there it is. The gospel, as Jesus tells it and does it. The ones far off and the ones up close – on the last day – shall be invited to the very same feast, the very same party, laid for us with a single sacrifice. Whether we join the party is entirely up to each of us. But there shall only ever be one party.

What if the Prodigal Son is the story of God and humanity, beginning to end – the entire Bible collapsed into 21 verses? The Creator/Parent/Father/Mother of everything gives humanity all that was made. For love. *It is yours – to keep and to care for, my beloved children.* Almost instantly the children hear a word the father never said. The word “share.” Because more than enough for everyone was available, endlessly so. Better that we divide it now, half the children thought, and admitted so aloud. Their asking killed the father outright. His heart ticked on but was broken all the same. He gave the children all they asked for.

Half ran away and enjoyed themselves to no end. The other half stayed, worked themselves nearly to death, complained constantly, and were jealous of the ones who escaped. So it went for all of time. Until in the end, none were happy. Half ended up broken down and ruined. The other half miserable and exhausted, but with enough energy to gloat. All of them still thinking, feeling, talking, and acting like slaves, instead of beloved children in possession of the whole wide world. Until, finally, all is lost.

Running away from home turns out to be impossible – since where the child goes, the Father is, until going home is as if intended all along. And all the children wind up the same place they started – at home. Together. Discovering that one is not a slave after all, but God’s beloved child.

Turns out the runaway figures it out even more easily than the one who stayed, the one who thought himself the good son all along. But to be good, finally, is to die – die to

certain ideas and beliefs. No doubt there are more; but for the sake of this story – and the alliteration – I’m choosing three. To be the sons and daughters, the children, of God we were made to be, we have to die to three ways of thinking, feeling, talking, and living upon which we are more dependent than we ever admit: slavery, scarcity and segregation.

A loving older brother confident of his father’s provision would not have let his little brother go so easily. But he wasn’t. So he did. And he may not have been the one to wish his father dead – out loud – but he took his share of the inheritance all the same. All that was left belonged to him, to do with as he pleased. Still he thought, spoke, and acted like a slave. Bitter. Resentful. “You gave him a fatted calf but never even gave me a baby goat!” He speaks the language of scarcity. “That son of yours!” Refusing to name him as brother, who is his brother all the same. The language of segregation – speaking as if they are separate even though they are not.

Kinship can be denied. It cannot be undone. They are brothers, however they choose to talk. Wherever they choose to stand. Beg as they might for separate facilities. There is only one party. Only one feast. Only one sacrifice, once and for all. We do not have to join. But neither will there be another.

We live in trying times, friends. But no more trying than most others, I expect. Especially since folks have always lived in families, where the fuss over which kid got the biggest cupcake – or who Mom loved the most, or how bad the bad kid was going to be before she either died, went to jail, or reformed – has always been going on. And always, alongside it, this story – told across the whole 66 books of the Bible and in these 21 verses: the Creator, Father, Mother of us all, making each and every one of us brother and sister to all the others, bequeathing us the entire creation for our own pleasure and survival, enough for each one to have all she and he need – with baskets of leftovers too.

For what? For free. For love. Not because we earned it. Not because we ever could earn it. But rather, simply because God wants to give it to us. The day we learn the difference, friends, between slaves and sons, the day we finally understand that every single human being is our brother, our sister, the day we finally realize there is enough of everything for everybody: Wow, friends. Just, wow! Because that’s the day we have the gospel itself in our hands, our hearts, our own mind’s eye. And then – *then* – we can do anything.