

Rejoice with Me
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Today is Laetare Sunday. More traditionally liturgical churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, use an introit on this day that begins “Rejoice, O Jerusalem!” or “*Laetare Jerusalem.*” So today marks a contrast: in a season of penitence and sober reflection, today is a bright spot of rejoicing. Priests would wear rose-colored vestments, as a symbol of joy and hope. It is also called Refreshment Sunday, because the Lenten fasts could be relaxed a bit on this day.

Today, we heard the word “rejoice” a number of times. In the two or so parables that Jesus tells, we have a rejoicing shepherd, a rejoicing housewife, angels in heaven rejoicing, and a rejoicing father. And in each case, there is not just one individual content with a private rejoicing. It is “rejoice with me!” to the neighborhood, or the citizens of heaven, or the older brother. This exhortation or command to rejoice may seem either friendly or...coercive.

Don’t get me wrong – I love these parables. But we just have to recognize that we do not all want to rejoice just because someone tells us to. If I were to look out, on any given Sunday, to the worshipping congregation here, I am sure that there would be a range of rejoicing, grieving, anxiety, excitement, and boredom. I am reminded of something written by Kathleen Norris, a writer about the spiritual life. She spent 9 months in a monastery, following the Benedictine office of the hours: frequent corporate prayer. The monks would chant all 150 Psalm in rotation in the course of a week. You get the whole range there too – from exultation to crushing depression. Norris noted that no matter whether you actually felt the emotion of the particular Psalm you were reciting at the moment, you could be sure someone else in the congregation was feeling it. So they went through all of them together, accompanying each other from the depths to the heights and back again.

We need to recognize that viewpoint matters in how we hear a story. The common name for today’s parable is the Prodigal Son, of course. Which focuses on the fact that the younger son was extravagant with his inherited (or advance-on-inheritance) money. But some could also call it The Prodigal Father, The Cheated Older Son, or Family Feud. By placing this story within what should be the closest of family relationships, the parable encourages us to think personally and take sides.

A scholar names Mark Allan Powell did a study about this passage, asking people from different cultures: Why did the younger son end up where he did? People from Russia answered: because there was a famine. People from Africa answered: because nobody helped him. People from America answered: he wasted his money. So their viewpoints filled out the story, leading them to various interpretations. Even the most familiar parables lend themselves to this kind of exploration.

The most common interpretation is to see the father of the family as God, the older son as the faithful Jews of Jesus’ time, and the younger son as the newly repentant, tax collector and sinners that are welcomed back into relationship with a loving God. But in some ways, they are all broken characters, in need of rescue, in need of forgiveness, and, perhaps, waiting for that call to rejoice. And there is still more work to be done, even at the end of the parable.

The fact that a younger son asks for his share of the inheritance before his father's death is a clear sign that the relationship was broken even before we begin. Why so eager to leave? Why so eager that this young person would say, in effect, "you are dead to me, give me my money, goodbye?" And the fact that the father agrees is really rather odd. This is not loving, responsible parenting. The chances of this working out well for a young person who has cut himself off from the sustenance of community is small. It is almost a set up for disaster. There may even have been a quality of "good riddance" as the father gets rid of this obnoxious son and has a peaceful home again with his hard-working dutiful sibling.

For the first time, in my reading of the story this week, I wondered whether there is a quality of repentance in the wild running of the father to the ragged returning son in the road. He hurries to greet him, perhaps thinking, "how could I have given this young man the financial tools to destroy himself and let him go do it? I have sinned, I need forgiveness."

On the other hand, it is not clear to me that this young man is all that repentant. He is definitely hungry. He "came to himself" it reads. But his thoughts are running to how to get some reasonable food. His thoughts are running to the best, most persuasive words he can use with his old father to get what he wants. It's hard to tell whether he is actually repentant or just hoodwinking his old man one more time.

And what about the rift between the father and the older son? In all his life, he had not been offered affirmation or celebration. He watched his younger brother act out in virtual suicide. He watches his father abase himself by running and fawning over deceitful son. Nobody bothered to call him in from the fields to enjoy a reunion. The world is topsy-turvy. How can he just walk into the feast s though nothing had happened?

Lent is a time for reflection – for both introspection and extro-spection – if that's a word (I'm pretty sure it's not. Maybe it is a time for contemplation and empathy around the theme of being lost and broken – whichever character you choose to identify with. In the safety and support of a season and a community of this kind of reflection, we begin to see the reasons and the circumstances that lead to fractured relationships, suspicion of joy, insistence on our own best interests. We can see how our perceived need for autonomy may cut us off from community. We see how we can sink into despair when we second-guess the past. We recognize our longing for love and our clumsy search for it. The hunger of the younger son for the food that his former servants would eat is a misplaced hunger for something larger. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

All of the characters in our parable think in terms of scarcity. At the end, though, we do not get a sense of moderation or calculation. There is a feast, to which everyone is invited. Every time relationship is restored through divine love which is active, searching, and healing, every time someone is welcomed home, so to speak, it does not mean that there is less for anyone else. It actually means there is more: more food, more wine, more music, more rejoicing. Forgiveness does not calculate costs: it is a gift continually received and given through God's unconditional welcome home.

Ernest Hemingway told the story of a Spanish father whose son Paco had run away from home. The father suspected that Paco had taken off for Madrid, the big city, and after searching unsuccessfully for him for a while, he took out an advertisement in the newspaper. It read, "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven! Love, Papa." When the father

went to the hotel at noon on Tuesday, there were, milling around the hotel, some 800 young men named Paco who had seen the ad and had come to be reconciled with their fathers.

The craving for forgiveness and a welcome home is everywhere. Jesus saw this need in the conflicted society in which he lived and in the sad stories of those he met. So he sat down to eat with tax collectors and sinners and foreigners as a way to demonstrate a welcome home. He told parables about joy to people who complained about his table companions. He says, be like the friends of the shepherd, and rejoice with me. He says, be like the neighbors of the widow, and rejoice with me. He says, be like the angels in heaven and rejoice over each miserable person who finds forgiveness. He says, be like the younger son and turn your footsteps toward home. He says, be like the unwise father and run to embrace the one who hurt you and was hurt in return. He says, if you feel like the older brother, reach into your heart to find the truth that God's love was always there, and everything that God has to give – love, new life, and a deep connection with others – has always been yours for the taking. There was always enough for a feast.

Today's parables tell us that divine joy will be available to us when we realize that we are all broken in some way, that we are all outsiders who are invited to the joy banquet, not because we have earned it, but because of the overflowing love of the host. Whether we have wasted our lives and resources, or whether we feel the load of resentment because we have never had that chance, whether we have challenged or enabled or affirmed our children, we are on the outside until we respond to God's invitation to the place of joy. We cannot be coerced into rejoicing, but the vibrant and compelling invitation remains.

In the worship setting, the communion table is our feast. It is where we are welcomed home, no matter what our situation or circumstances. Our inheritance, it turns out, is intact. God waits here offering us, love, purpose, and a future. We are invited, all of us together, to rejoice. Amen.