



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector

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## CELEBRATE!

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 10, 2013*

*The Fourth Sunday in Lent*

*Based on 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32*

You've likely heard this parable before, yes? Most of us know this as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. As I've studied it over the years, I've come to think that's a misnomer because it puts the emphasis in the wrong place. I prefer to call it the Parable of the Father and Two Sons.

As the longest and best known of Jesus' parables, it's been preached from every possible angle—from the perspective of the father, the younger son, the older son, the slaves, the hired hands, the villagers, the absent mother (where is she anyway?). Perhaps the only perspective left to preach from is that of "The Abandoned Swine." \*

I considered that ... but decided against it. Not sure if you consider that good news or bad news.

I happened to discuss this parable with one of my St. Bart's staff colleagues. His eyes sparkled with recognition: "Oh—that's a very popular merengue song in my country, the Dominican Republic!" Merengue, like the dance? For this parable? I thought for a moment we had a communication gap. But he said, "No, really." I said, "OK, send me a YouTube link."

Which he did ([http://youtu.be/b9Y1x9\\_LEQ8](http://youtu.be/b9Y1x9_LEQ8)) along with the words in Spanish and an English translation:

*Juan said one day to his father:*

*"Give me what is mine, I do not want to wait,  
I'm going to the big city  
I want to enjoy life " . . .*

*And the father said to him there:*

*My son has returned, let's celebrate*

*Throw a party, let's sing*

*[Juan, my son] is back, let's celebrate*

It was this parable, sung to merengue music—joyous, very danceable merengue music. Suddenly the sermon possibilities opened in a new direction . . . Hold that thought.

This parable of the Father and Two Sons feels warm and fuzzy to us, but it's way more outrageous than it appears on the surface. Jesus' audience, on hearing this parable, would have been as shocked as you would have been if I'd just asked you to stand up and do the merengue with me right here in church. Here's why.

In this 1st-century Mediterranean Jewish culture, the oldest son inherited twice the share of any other son. So the older son would have inherited 2/3 of the father's property, the younger son 1/3.

Inheritance happened at the father's death, not before. In the very rare instances where the father gave the inheritance early, it was at the father's initiation, never the son's. And when a son inherited before his father's death, his obligation was to remain at home and care for his parents in their old age.

You can see that the younger son basically told his father, "I wish you were dead." He may have taken his share of the family land/property, painstakingly built up over generations, and cashed out to developers. The neighbors were likely furious, the foundations of their world shaken—is this the new thing? Will our

children do this next? The younger son abandons his family, blows all the money in Vegas, then a recession hits, and he ends up slopping pigs—not a kosher occupation for a Jewish boy. He bottoms out, as we say. When he “comes to himself,” which is not so much repentance as developing a strategy for survival, he crafts a “strategic” speech and practices it as he trudges home, planning to throw himself at his father’s feet.

But his father runs down the road to meet him. Men, especially heads of households, did not run—that was considered undignified, dishonorable. The son starts his speech but never gets to his punch line. Rather than being hired as a field hand, he is welcomed back—very publicly—as his father’s son. His father throws a huge party of celebration, inviting not just their family but the whole village. Take that, neighbors!

If the parable ended here, it might be warm and fuzzy, happily ever after. But there’s that older brother. How many of you are youngest children? How many of you are oldest children?

Older children know what it is to do the responsible thing, to follow the rules, to help keep younger siblings in line. But this older brother has already taken his 2/3 share of the father’s property. Did he intervene when his brother asked for the early inheritance? Did he say, “Oh Father, no, no, you keep this 2/3 as long as you live”?

Now the older brother hears the music and dancing (usually done after the meal), but his invitation seems to have been lost in the mail. When he finds out what’s going on, he’s understandably angry. Wait a minute—everything here is rightfully mine! That was my fatted calf you killed, that was my ring and my robe you just gave to him. This is not fair—you’re giving away my stuff!

The older son’s role was to act as head of hospitality to guests. But this older son refuses “to go in”—in Greek, “to receive.”

The father, who somehow neglected to invite his older son to the party, comes out to meet the older son, again dishonoring himself: fathers did not go out to sons; sons came in to their fathers. The father goes out to meet the older son, just as he went out to meet the younger son.

I worked like a slave for you, never disobeyed you. Well, except just now when you wouldn’t come in to the party when I told you to. You never gave me even a goat. Really? I gave you 2/3 of everything I own.

The parable ends with the father and older son arguing. We don’t know how this will play out. If you were asked to write an ending to this story, what would it be?

Maybe this is another reason why this parable seems so familiar. We know these characters, don’t we? They are we. We are they. And life doesn’t often provide neat, clean answers.

Jesus didn’t tell the story of a functional family having a perfect dinner party. If he did, who of us could feel we measure up, that we could fit in? This is the story of a family—a messy, real, very human family.

Jesus tells this parable in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about his eating with tax collectors and sinners. I wonder how those tax collectors and sinners, the Pharisees and scribes heard this? I wonder if they recognized themselves in it?

This parable follows immediately the parables of the Lost Sheep (the shepherd leaves the 99 to search for the one) and the Lost Coin (a widow searches frantically for one of her 10 lost coins; if you lost 10% of your net worth, you’d search frantically, too). In each case, when the lost is found, everyone is invited to rejoice with the finder, to celebrate what has been restored.

In this Parable of the Father and Two Sons the celebration happens because the younger son’s relationship with his father has been restored. The son couldn’t restore it himself, though it couldn’t have happened had he not made the effort to come back as a hired hand. The father is the only one who could restore the relationship, and he went to great lengths to do it. Father and younger son are reconciled; the son is restored to his place in the family and the village, even if everyone’s not happy about it.

The celebration is about that restoration, that reconciliation. And even as he celebrates, the father is trying to bring about another restoration, another reconciliation.

When we gather around this table, as we’ll do in just a few minutes, we will celebrate the Eucharist together. All of us together: tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes. All of us: messy imperfect people, just as we are. All of us loved wildly, foolishly by the God who is creating us (present tense). All of us beloved children of God, regardless of what we have done or what we have not done. That’s what we are celebrating—that relationship, that love, that reconciliation.

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We all get lost at some point, even if not as spectacularly as the younger son. We all “lose” or forget our relationship with God. Whenever we recognize and accept (receive) that love, our relationship with God is restored—not created, because it’s always been there, but restored. We can discover, re-discover and receive that relationship over and over again, as many times as it’s needed—there is no limit. And every time we are restored/reconciled, it’s worth celebrating.

This is not just about us. Remember that the mission of the Church, as defined in our *Book of Common Prayer* [p. 855] is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” We are to be “ambassadors for Christ.” We are to help others know how very much they are loved by God, whatever they may have done or not done, and then we are to celebrate that with them. Whenever, wherever that restoration happens, whether at this table or somewhere else, we are to drop everything and celebrate!

Last week I joined our Youth Confirmation class for what’s called an “Instructed Eucharist,” meaning we talked through the different parts of the Eucharist service as we did them. The first part of any Eucharist service is called the Gathering: we gather, somehow, in one place. In this service, we gather as the Procession enters, with elegant pageantry, joining those already here as we all sing together.

Last week the Youth Confirmation class sat around the table in the Vestry Room, sharing pizza and getting to know each other better. Then we got ready to start our Eucharist and tried to figure out what form our Gathering would take. There isn’t room for a Procession in the Vestry Room. I’m still not sure how this happened, but I do believe the Holy Spirit was involved: suddenly we were all swing dancing! The joy and celebration of our dancing stayed with us as we shared bread and wine and then took what we had received back out into the world. Those young people got it. Afterward I told several colleagues, “I wish every Eucharist started with swing dancing!”

Which brings us back to that Dominican song of this parable, set to merengue dance music.

Every Eucharist is a celebration, a dance of delight and joy, helping us re-member, re-connect, receive our relationship with God and each other. Imagine all of us jumping to our feet and swing dancing or doing the merengue or foxtrot or Harlem Shake up these aisles to communion. Imagine . . . That’s the kind of celebration this parable is talking about!

And who knows, one day we polite Episcopalians just might do it.

As you come to this table, or as you leave from it, dance if you want to. Whatever you do, celebrate! Celebrate! It’s the best party of all, and we’re all invited.

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\* *Bill Muehl, quoted by the Rev. Barbara Lundblad, Union Theological Seminary, Lent Gospel Texts overview 2/21/2013.*

*I am indebted to the late Doug Adams, professor of Christianity and the Arts at Pacific School of Religion, and his book *Prostitute in the Family Tree* for many of the insights into this parable.*

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