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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

HOUSE OF JOY

I don't know anyone who is neutral about the story of the Prodigal Son. People seem to be divided over this parable with some people loving this story of the wayward son whose father showers him with love and grace when he returns home. But another segment of people can't stand this story, feel it is extremely unfair to the older brother, and that it sends a bad message about irresponsible behavior. Jesus tells this parable as the last in a sequence of three parables that he tells one right after another. He tells these three parables in response to religious leaders who were grumbling about the way Jesus welcomed sinners and even ate with them. So Jesus tells them three stories about things that get lost: a shepherd who lost a sheep, a woman who lost a coin, and a father who lost a son. In each case, after the lost thing is found the person throws a great big party. The shepherd finds the sheep and then gathers his friends for a celebration. Jesus says: God is like that shepherd. The woman finds the coin and then calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. Jesus says: God is like that woman. The lost child returns home and the father is overjoyed and throws a big party. Jesus says: God is like that father. We learn that there is great joy in the heart of God upon finding and restoring what is lost, so much joy that one person cannot adequately celebrate this good news but that the joy must be shared--a party, a celebration with others is required. Joy lies at the heart of the gospel.

Now, regarding the first two parables, the joy and ensuing celebration at finding what was lost seems fine to us even if they do strike us as a little hyperbolic. I mean, does a lost sheep or a lost coin really prompt great rejoicing and a big party? But we can go along with the premise of these two stories without much difficulty. After all, sheep and coins are not culpable

for their behaviors. Our problem, however, arises with the third parable, the story of the son who showed no regard for his family connections, who basically told his dad, "I can't wait for you die, please give me my share of the inheritance now," who ran off and wasted that money in immoral and selfish ways of living, who only decided to come home when he finally ran out of money and was hungry and in need, and who despite all this horrible behavior was nevertheless given a hero's welcome home by his father. If joy lies at the heart of the gospel, then it is also the cause of much offense. For many of us, the joyful celebration of this irresponsible and callous son offends our sensibilities of right and wrong.

Some of us who have at some point found ourselves lost in life, who have acted in ways we regret, who have done things that shame us, some of us may appreciate the grace and forgiveness shown by the father to his wayward son because we ourselves know what it is like to need such grace. And yet, others of us relate better to the older brother. The older brother, much like the religious leaders Jesus was telling this story to, much like many of us here today, the older brother was dutiful and responsible, faithful to his father, a dedicated and hard worker, someone who was conscientious about doing what was right. There is no joy in this older brother's heart as he stands outside the house and refuses to join the party for his irresponsible brother.

Joy lies at the core of these three parables. So we would do well to focus on this matter of joy. Sometimes Christians have forgotten that joy lies at the heart of the gospel--not rules, not judgment. Jesus came to save the lost--not to condemn us, not to hand down a bunch of rules we are supposed to live by, not to burden us with a grim, rigid faith. Jesus came to save the lost because God loves us and finding and restoring the lost brings joy to the heart of God. And yet,

how is it that so many of us committed Christians find ourselves standing with the older brother outside the house of joy?

I got to thinking about that question and I came up with two issues that stand between us and the joy that God invites us to know. One obstacle between us and joy is anxiety. Humans are an anxious people but it seems that modern society has only increased our anxieties. The rates of anxiety disorders among Americans, especially among American young people, have skyrocketed. There are a myriad of things that make us anxious. We are often anxious about money, about our health, about our safety. We are anxious about succeeding in life and in our careers, about achieving and performing according to expectations. We are anxious to prove ourselves to family members, friends, and colleagues. Some of us are anxious to be loved and accepted by others, to win our parents' approval, to receive affirmation of our worth. Many of us sitting here today are among our society's hyper-responsible. We are those who can be counted upon to do our duty, to be good citizens, to be faithful family members and committed members of our volunteer groups. People turn to us when they need help. And we throw ourselves into a multitude of commitments. But along with all that comes increased anxiety as we struggle to perform to expectations, to carry out our tasks, to manage busy schedules, to make it all work.

I wonder if the older brother felt some of that kind of anxiety. He was the responsible one. He was the committed one. Did he feel the anxiety of trying to perform up to other people's expectations or the expectations he put upon himself? Was he anxious about securing his father's approval? Did he know the anxiety that comes from trying to do too much? Did he forget something we ourselves are prone to forget as we scramble to succeed in life and carry out our tasks and responsibilities--that no matter how high we climb in status or accomplishments, it is never as important as knowing and living in the depth of God's love. We cannot know joy

when we are anxious. We cannot know the joy that comes from receiving God's abundant gifts in life if we are so anxious about constructing a life on our own. Anxiety stands in the way of joy.

But so too does resentment. And as the older brother stood outside the house, refusing to join the party, it is easy to see his resentment and to feel his resentment. Resentment plays a role in our hearts and minds and souls as well, especially when someone has wronged us or a loved one. We are all likely to harbor resentments against someone who has done us wrong: an ex-spouse, a parent, a sibling, a friend, maybe a boss or colleague. And there are those resentments we have toward people who unjustly received blessings or benefits they didn't deserve--and those resentments are even deeper if we felt *we* deserved those blessings or benefits instead of them.

So there stands the older brother choking on his understandable resentments outside the house where the joyful party is going on. And there we stand beside him filled with similar resentments in our own lives. It isn't fair! It's wrong. And we are united with him in resentment.

But then something happens. The father comes out. It's a repeat performance. You see, first the father went out to the lost younger son who had finally come home. The father runs to welcome him and embraces him with joy. But now, the father comes out to greet *another* lost son. Yes, the older son is also lost--because even though his body remained home on the family farm, even though he never left the father physically, and did his duty and all that was expected of him and even more, even still the older brother was lost. His heart was lost. His mind was lost. The father says to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." And we see what love the father has for this older son. There was always a party going on in his father's heart for him, and he hadn't seen it. Maybe it was his anxiousness or his resentment, but

the older son hadn't seen or appreciated the joy he inspired in his father's heart. And so once again the loving father comes out to help a lost son find his way home to the house of joy. Come inside, the father beckons. Come inside and be found.

What anxieties keep you from knowing God's joy? What resentments keep you from coming into the house of joy? Reflecting upon this parable of the prodigal son, the preacher Tom Long observes that, "We will never really experience the joy of our faith until we realize that we are all outsiders who have been invited into the party of joy through no merit of our own." And so God comes out to find each one of us, who are lost in body, heart, and soul, with the invitation: come inside. Come inside the house of joy.