HEAVENLY JOY

(The Bible's Greatest Hits II, 2)

Pilgrim Church, Duluth October 9, 1977 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Luke 15:11-24

In the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, there are three parables, all pointing to heavenly joy. When the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he "lays it on his shoulder rejoicing" and invites his friends to share his good news. "Even so," said Jesus, "I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentence."

When the woman finds her lost coin, she invites in all her neighbors, saying "Rejoice with me..." "Even so," said Jesus, "I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And now when the prodigal returns, the Father cries:

... bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

But can we believe this joy? It is a crucial question. Unless we can believe in the joy, we cannot believe in the love.

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There are two kinds of people who have difficulty believing the joy of God: the respectable and the disreputable. Both groups, indeed, are likely to lack the quality of true joy themselves. The respectable are likely to mistake joy for a smug feeling of superiority. The disreputable often confuse joy with the counterfeit pleasure of dissipation. And while these two groups differ radically in some ways, they tend to think of God in much the same way. For the superrespectable, God is also super-respectable. He never has any fun. The disreputable ones agree; God is a square whose only joy lies in making people like themselves miserable. Neither group believes that God is really glad to see the disreputable ones take an interest in him. The respectable people resent the Father's joy; the disreputable people distrust it.

It was that resentment and that distrust that Jesus confronted in the parable of the Prodigal Son-a story that might better be entitled, "The Joyous Father". Jesus was speaking to the super-respectable ones in the Pharisees, and the disreputable ones in the people called "the sinners." He knew that both needed to believe the joy if they were to believe the love.

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Here is the story:

We begin with a scene of departure.

THERE WAS A MAN WHO HAD TWO SONS; AND THE YOUNGER OF THEM SAID TO HIS FATHER, FATHER, GIVE ME THE SHARE OF PROPERTY THAT FALLS TO ME. AND HE DIVIDED HIS PROPERTY BETWEEN THEM. NOT MANY DAYS LATER, THE YOUNGER SON GATHERED ALL HE HAD AND TOOK HIS JOURNEY INTO A FAR COUNTRY...

Well, it is hard to be a younger son. It is especially hard in these former days when the major inheritance and honor falls to the elder sons. And here is a boy with dreams. He is restless and he longs for liberty. He is caught in the generation gap, and he wants to get away. Life is a drag down on the farm. So he says- and we note that this is all he has to say-GIVE ME MY SHARE OF THE PROPERTY.

Then the father divides the farm between them, two thirds to the elder brother, one third to the younger, according to law. The father is not obliged to do this. He could keep his property intact and have free use of all its profits until he died. That was the father's prerogative-and moreover, a Galiean farmer likes to keep the family freehold in one piece. But he does as his son asks, apparently without hesitation. There were a lot of sons leaving home in those days.

The story continues

NOT MANY DAYS LATER, THE YOUNGER SON GATHERED ALL HE HAD AND TOOK HIS JOURNEY INTO A FAR COUNTRY, AND THERE HE SQUANDERED HIS PROPERTY IN LOOSE LIVING.

So he hitchhiked to Berkeley.

And now we begin to see that this departure is more than geographical. It is spiritual. His father's hard-earned wealth is squandered on pleasures that can only give his father pain when he hears of them. Ambition quickly gives way to dissipation, and liberty to license. And when his father's money is all gone, the son discovers that a recession has overtaken that far country. The unemployment rate is now above 6.2% and going up. There are few openings for ex-farm hands with perpetual hangovers. Finally, this once cocky young man finds a job feeding swine. You would have to be an orthodox Jew of ancient times to know what that meant. That was as low as you could get. That was what the A.A. people call "touching bottom."

The next part of the story has to do with a return.

AND HE WOULD GLADLY HAVE FED ON THE PODS THAT THE SWINE ATE; AND NO ONE GAVE HIM ANYTHING.

BUT WHEN HE CAME TO HIMSELF HE SAID....

There is a sermon right there! That was not his true self, you see, that fellow freaking out in the far country, that selfish, ungrateful son. There was another man in him.

BUT WHEN HE CAME TO HIMSELF, HE SAID, "HOW MANY OF MY FATHER'S HIRED SERVANTS HAD BREAD ENOUGH AND TO SPARE, BUT I PERISH HERE WITH HUNGER! I WILL ARISE AND GO TO MY FATHER, AND I WILL SAY TO HIM, "FATHER I HAVE SINNED AGAINST HEAVEN AND BEFORE YOU. I AM NO LONGER WORTHY TO BE CALLED YOUR SON: TREAT ME AS ONE OF YOUR HIRED SERVANTS." AND HE AROSE AND CAME TO HIS FATHER.

Yes, it is a calculating speech. The motives and the prayers of lost sons are never altogether pure. But the fact is that he does turn around and head for home.

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Now we come to the part of the story that is the point of the story. After the departure and return, then reception.

Perhaps now we can imagine that father stepping out onto his sundeck after supper. He looks only half-consciously toward a patch of road that is visible between the bushes in the distance. There was a time when he looked over there deliberately, several times every day. But so many months have passed now with no news of the boy. Neighbors and relatives must be right when they say, he is certainly dead. It is only a habit, that glance toward the road, a habit sustained by less than hope. Only a father's gesture, when nothing but gestures remain.

And now on that patch of road visible between the bushes, a tattered tramp appears. His hair hangs in tangles to his shoulders, his blue jeans are ripped, his feet are bare. He staggers, rather than walks, and though his face is almost childlike in its wanness, there is a touch of white in his beard.

The father's eyes snap into focus. He looks again. Oh no! Don't get up your hopes again, old man. Don't open the wound again. Your son was straight and strong with a spring in his step. He was no emaciated wreck like this, staring at the ground as he stumbles along. This is only one more of those thousands of displaced persons passing by from that famine-struck, far country. Your eyes are filmed over with senility old man; your mind is confused from too much waiting.

But there is something there that was there long ago when they walked down the furrows together, and when they pruned the olive trees. A set of the shoulders, a curve of the cheek-bones, a way of picking the wild grain by the roadside and bobbing it between his teeth.

A father knows his son!

BUT WHILE HE WAS YET AT A DISTANCE, HIS FATHER SAW HIM AND HAD COMPASSION, AND RAN...

The field hands look up in astonishment. Mature oriental men of property do not run. They walk with dignity, slowly. Much less do they leap over fences and scramble through the underbrush. The field hands throw down their tools and go running after the old man convinced that he is having a fit. Why is he going after that stranger? He must be mad. But the old man is saner than they, unless the ecstasy

of joy be madness. And the old man sees better than they. For a father knows his son.

And it is as a son, not as a hired servant, that he receives him back. The ring, the robe, the shoes-they all proclaim this to the world.

...HIS FATHER SAW HIM, AND EMBRACED AND KISSED HIM. AND THE SON SAID TO HIM, FATHER, I HAVE SINNED AGAINST HEAVEN AND BEFORE YOU: I AM NO LONGER WORTHY TO BE CALLED YOUR SON. TREAT ME AS ONE OF YOUR HIRED SERVANTS. BUT THE FATHER SAID TO HIS SERVANTS, ' BRING QUICKLY THE BEST ROBE, AND PUT IT ON HIM; AND BRING THE FATTED CALF AND KILL IT, AND LET US EAT AND MAKE MERRY: FOR THIS MY SON WAS DEAD, AND IS ALIVE AGAIN: HE WAS LOST, AND IS FOUND.' AND THEY BEGAN TO MAKE MERRY.

Can you believe the joy?

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That's what it is like, said Jesus, when one person, any person, no matter how depraved or derelict, comes to himself and looks toward your Father in heaven. Then there is a joy in heaven beyond our ability to conceive. It is like the joy of a salesman who loses his largest account, and then wins it back again. Only a thousand times more so. It is like the joy of a housewife who loses her husband's paycheck and after searching all day, finds it under the clothes dryer. That's what this joy is like, only a thousand times more so. It is like the joy of a man whose son is reported missing in a foreign country, and then suddenly walks through the door. Only God's joy is a million times more so.

That is what Jesus told the Pharisees and the sinners. And it is news worth listening to. For there comes a time in the life of everyone, be he respectable or disreputable, when he arrives at a turn in the road. He finds himself out in the far country alone. He wants to come home then. He wants to come home as a son. But there are things that stand in the way-guilt feelings, fear, a chip on the shoulder, resentment and distrust. What must a man believe then? That he is a sinner? That helps. But above all he must believe in the joy. He must believe that God will meet him in the road and be glad. For if we believe the joy, we discover the welcome, if we believe the joy, we encounter the love.