

“We Have to Celebrate and Rejoice”

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts
to your mercy and join in the celebration. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

When it became clear that we were going to complete our discernment process about becoming an Open & Affirming Congregation smack dab in the middle of Lent, I was a little concerned. Lent is traditionally a solemn time, when we focus on repentance and setting our feet back in place on the path of Christ. Now, as our Open & Affirming Statement says, this declaration does include some confession, as we name the exclusion and discrimination lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning folks have faced from the church over the centuries. But this act is primarily one of joy and liberation, a moment that should make us want to shout Hallelujah! So how to mark the occasion properly during Lent?

Well, we solved that problem with an invented loop-hole called Gaudete in Lent. If Advent can have a joyous pink day in the midst of all that wintery purple, Lent can include a little break for some rainbow sparkles and balloons! But really, the opportunity was already present for us in this scripture the lectionary offered. What better passage to read than one that reminds us that “we have to celebrate and rejoice”? Is there a better story to help us remember and believe that everyone is invited to the party?

Now I need to thread this needle very carefully, lest unintended parallels are drawn. Be clear about this: when the Church declares itself “open to & affirming of” LGBTQ+ people, we are not somehow claiming that God is now welcoming these folks home from their previous life of sin. There is nothing about being LGBTQ+ that is sinful. That is not the analogy we are looking at today. We will come back to the various perspectives on sin that exist in this story in a moment, but do not for a moment conflate living as an LGBTQ+ person with whatever it was that the younger brother was doing when he left town. That is not the teaching the Holy Spirit is offering us today.

It has been clear for a long time that for those of us who’ve been in church most of our lives, the character we need to look to for our lesson is not the Prodigal Son but the Elder Brother. We are the ones who never left the home place, who have lived lives of daily faithfulness, without asking for much or questioning much or risking much. We are the ones in danger of being tempted by resentment, when we see the depth of God’s grace for people who haven’t lived nearly as carefully as we have. We are the ones who would just as soon keep working as attend a party with those people who aren’t even paying for the cake.

We’ve heard this before, this warning not to be so tight-fisted with the mercy and love of God. We don’t want to be the Elder Brother; nobody actually likes the Elder Brother. But when you’ve put so much effort into something, having to share it with someone who did none of that work rankles.

But did you notice the moment of grace in this story for the Elder Brother? It's harder to see because the grace doesn't show up in what's there; it's present in what isn't there. This story, as Jesus tells it in Luke, doesn't have an ending. He doesn't say if the Elder Brother goes into the party or if he stomps off to the back 40 to hack at some underbrush. And that lack of a conclusion is a gift of grace for those of us whose lives make us more like the Elder Brother than the Younger Brother. Because we get to choose. We get to pick the ending. We are continually writing the ending to this story. And today, as we celebrate becoming an Open & Affirming Congregation, we are enthusiastically choosing to go in and enjoy the party! Can I get a Hallelujah?

For so long, so many years, the church has acted as an angry gatekeeper, working overtime to ensure that nobody undeserving gets into the party. No Younger Brothers allowed! Much of that energy has been focused on the LGBTQ+ community, in ways that have been damaging and violent. Let's look for a moment at how the Elder Brother's judgments reflect this ugly tradition. The story tells us that the Younger Brother "squandered his property in dissolute living." But somehow, by the time the Elder Brother is arguing out in the field with his father, this has turned into "this son of yours ... devoured your property with prostitutes!" How did he know how his brother lost his fortune? Did he have spies in that far-off country? Or was he just making stuff up, grasping at the most sordid possibilities, to increase the weight of his brother's guilt?

Let's look at what the story really tells us about what the Younger Brother did. What's interesting is how little detail we're given about how he lost his money, especially in relation to the level of detail we're given about his subsequent suffering. "He squandered his property in dissolute living," it says. Other translations use the word "riotous." But the Greek word there is more literally "unsaving." The word isn't used anywhere else, so it's not clear if that's referring to being wasteful with money or if it's a more spiritual salvation it's referring to. I'm guessing we're supposed to embrace the ambiguity. But what is even more interesting is what happens because of that wasteful living. The Younger Son ends up tending pigs, right? One of the most shameful jobs for a good Jewish boy. Yes, but no. Jesus doesn't say that the Younger Brother ends up tending pigs simply because he wasted all his money. There is a famine. The famine is what pushes him to the brink of starvation. It's not clear that Jesus is drawing a line from his wastefulness to his suffering at all. Meanwhile, the folks back at home are making all sorts of assumptions that have very little to do with what actually happened.

And this is how it happens, isn't it? We see people we don't know, living in ways that are different than we do, and rather than getting to know them and understand why they do what they do, we tell ourselves stories about their shortcomings and sinfulness, so that when they suffer, we don't feel obliged to respond. We are safe and secure over here, and if you'd lived responsibly like we did, that bad stuff wouldn't have happened to you.

This self-righteousness party may not be particularly enjoyable, but it's safe and familiar and doesn't make us question our own choices. So when someone shows up, inviting us to that party over there, we may be resistant. That party is loud. That party smells like spicy food. That party has people who dress, well, in ways that confuse us. They're flashy. Honestly, now that you mention it, it does sound like a better party than this sedate affair we put on uncomfortable shoes for, doesn't it? And that's just it. That person who came over here to invite us in, that person is one of those ambassadors for Christ that Paul was writing about in Second Corinthians.

What if we didn't have to be the Elder Brother in this story? What if we could be that servant who told the Elder Brother what was going on? "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." The servant knows what's what. The important thing here is "safe and sound." Hallelujah! Of course we have to celebrate and rejoice!

Maybe we don't have to beat ourselves up anymore for being the Elder Brother. Maybe we can just lean into being that servant, the one who acts as an ambassador, telling everyone we meet that they should come into the party, because we are celebrating and rejoicing that God's mercy is for everyone. Just as we get to choose the ending to the story, we can choose who we will be in this story. We can be the ones preparing the feast. We can be the ones getting the dancing going. We can be the ones running through the fields, telling everyone in the household to quit what they're doing and come in to the party. We can be the ones dressing the wounds of

the ones who are just arriving home after living rough in a world that has told them they're worthless. We can be the ones running out to meet them, to bring them home not bowed down with shame, but enthusiastically embraced. We can be the ones who listen carefully, once the party has died down, to the stories of their suffering, gently reassuring them of their worthiness in the eyes of God. We can be the ones who sing the songs of redemption. This is what it means to be ambassadors for Christ. This is what it means to join the party. Can I get a Hallelujah? Hallelujah and Amen!