

Luke 15:11-31

4th Sunday in Lent

March 13, 1983

You are here today. You have gotten up, made the effort to be here. Others sit at home, stay in bed, read the paper, but you have gotten here today.

Some of you will sing in the choir today. Others have forgotten the church all week, but you have week after week made provision for the music of our worship. You have given that something more.

Some of you have been busy all week. You have served on the boards and the committees of the church and in the community. While others have played and slept and watched TV, you have been working doubletime to provide for the needs of this community. Without you we might lack fire protection, ambulance service, uniforms for the band, equipment and funds for the sports teams, Without your efforts, young people may have been denied opportunities to perform, the senior citizens center may have not been there for those who need it, our streets and water systems may have been inadequate. Without you our community may have lacked our hospital, or the health of the businesses that has been gained through promotion of our town. Without you so many would have had so much less, in your work, in your free time, you make this a better place for all of us.

You are the honest ones. Many don't care, don't try, do what they must to get by, but day after day you try your best. You won't cheat another because you know it is wrong. You won't waste your life in drunken carousing because you know it is wrong. You are faithful to your husband, because you know it is a sin to be unfaithful. You provide for your children because you know that it is expected of you as a good person.

And some of you, myself included, are going to be mighty upset one day in the near or distant future. We shall arrive at that destination for which we have slaved, that great awards banquet in the sky. We shall come with all our secret sacrifices tucked under our arms, all the slights that we ignored, all the times we gave for others who didn't care, all the times we walked the second mile while others hitched a ride to the end. If knew no one knew or cared, surely our heavenly father would one day reward us. Yes, we shall arrive at that banquet.

But instead of pastors and Sunday School teachers and Bible Studiess and town board members and quilt makers and firemen and funeral meal servers, instead of all of those who ~~we~~ we knew were the real Christians getting the applause and the bows, Our master of ceremonies shall invite us to clap and ~~the~~ cheer for the drunkards, for the liars, for the cheats, for the wife abusers for the loose livers who have come home at last. We who have give, so much will be asked to honor those who truly gave nothing. For many of us it will be upsetting.

But mark my words, that is the way it will be. Jesus promised us, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninty-nine righteous person who need no repentence. More joy over trouble-pakets who come home, than over you and me.

And so on one would ever miss the point, Jesus told one of his best stories about high livers, and faithful sons.

The story parable of the prodigal Son we call it.

A son went away. Took all his father had to give him and went away. Many have done that here in our own town. They hide out from their father in their booze, knowing another drink as the only god they will fear, love and trust above all else. Others do it with their work, thinking their business, their success is more important than people or anything. Others find their god in sex, still others in thier own respectability. There are many ways to go away.

No preacher came out to tell him he would go to hell if he didn't return home. At first it would have done no good, he was having too much fun, Later he knew with no one telling him.

I remember a man who gave himself over to selfish living. One day lonlines became his only companion. And a body paying him back for years of abuse, pain. The far country has its own rewards, if you live long enough its empitnes will come to hannt you.

He came to his senses, Jesus tells us. He climbed out of the gutter and crawled home. And there was joy and feasting over his return.

His older brother had been everything you and I have tried to be, at least

those of us who have never wandered away. Faithfully for years he served, keeping his commitments, doing twice his fair share, making up for the brother who was gone. The ten commandments he knew by heart, and tried to keep them every day. He was just the son every father wants.

But why this party for his brother? Why the celebration for the good for nothing when the good for everything got not even a word of thank.

So the father answered' "Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. I was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found."

Son, you are always with me. That is everything that a father has to give. To be with the son. The truth is that is everything God has to give you. His presence, his love. Eternal life is nothing but this, being with God. There is no other reward, but to be with God. Son you were always with me.

There are many far countries. Some are commonly found downtown on Saturday nights, with the joy and the laughter of too much to drink, followed by the hungover pain of Sunday morning. We have condemned that far country, far more than we have understood it, for we church people fear that lawless uncontrolled often violent far country.

There are far countries of work and wealth and success and gossip, all of which we have made more respectable, even holding award banquets for those who have gone especially far in ~~this~~ far countries.

But there is one far country that is truly worse than all the ~~rest~~ rest. It is the far country of those who never left home, the far country of the oldre brather. It is the far country where preachers often live, and widows devoted to the church, and leaders of the congregation. God, how can you celbrate over them, don't I deserve better.

I walked by the Mecca one Saturday night. The music, the laughter, the the uproar came out to me, inviting me in. I did not enter, I was afraid.

But I knew one thing. When Jesus walked on this earth he spent his time in the Mecca, on Saturday night. And he didn't just drink Pepsi.

And he didn't get falling down drunk. But he did pick some people up and dust them off, and say it was party time because they had come home.

And the people up on the hill, with their organ and choir and their serious concern about life, their purity and their doctrines, they were the ones who strung up Jesus. Not the Mecca crowd, but the Sunday morning at Hettinger & Lutheran crowd, led by Schüssman and Humlie, they were the ones who turned him over to the authorities and said Jesus must die. And that is why this far country can be truly worse than all the rest.

Some say the story of the elder brother is never ended. We don't know what he decided. Will he go into the party, will he embrace his long lost brother, or will he lynch the one who tells stories against him. You and I are the older brother. God is waiting to see ^{down the story shall end} ~~what we will do.~~