

Lent 4, 2016

Join the Party

The Rev. Sue Sommer

Last week, we talked about the repentance that Jesus proclaimed and taught, en route to Jerusalem, being less about behavior and remorse, and more about seeing God and God's kingdom in a whole new way. This found traction with some of you who have done work in 12-step recovery – that recovery doesn't come about by wallowing in guilt about what one has done, but by seeking newness of life. And that even when you're not feeling that newness, grasping at the truth that such newness is, indeed, the only way forward. Our gospel for today explores that further, and as this parable is probably one of the best known parables of Jesus, I thought I might come at it from the ancient method of midrash – which is to say, interpretation by way of imaginatively expanding the story.

You're wondering why I'm out on the porch while all that ruckus is going on indoors? You must not be from around here. Well pull up a chair and let me tell you. Who knows, maybe you can help me figure it out. Near as I can tell, it all started a couple of years ago when my younger brother and my father lost their minds. Seriously, my brother went to Dad and asked for his share of the inheritance right then. I know, right? Who does that? He may as well have just said to Dad, "Drop dead." Yeah, well, apparently, the family farm wasn't good enough for him. He had to have adventure. He had to have excitement. I'm telling you, it must have shocked the old man into early senility, because he cashed out half the farm and gave it to the kid who hit the road as soon as he could. I stayed here. Well someone had to. Someone had to be the responsible one and since I'm the older brother – and apparently the only one with a lick of sense – it fell to me to try to reclaim our family honor.

We've done okay. Actually, we've made a nice profit these last few years. But make no mistake. It was the result of hard work and discipline. Crops don't grow all by themselves, you know. Well, okay, bad example, crops do actually grow all by themselves once you plant them, but you know what I mean.

I tell you, though, the old man was never the same. He'd try to take an interest in things, but whenever I'd go over the books with him, I'd catch him gazing out the door, down the road, watching, waiting. Mad? You're damn right it made me mad. I mean, here I am, busting a gut, not only keeping this place going, but trying to restore his honor in the eyes of our neighbors, but is he grateful? Does he throw me a party? That would be no.

So this morning, out of the blue, the kid comes crawling back. I'd been up since dawn working the back forty (hah! There's a shock, right?) so I wasn't there to see it, but the servants told me later how my father kicked off his shoes, hiked up his robes and ran like some field hand out to meet that no good sonofa...son of my father. And if that weren't enough, he called for the purple robe, put the family ring on his finger, put shoes on those filthy feet of his, and then called for the servants to arrange this party. Oh wait, that's not even the craziest part. He was just out here a moment ago, pleading with me to join the party. Yeah, like THAT'S gonna happen. He reminded me that I have the farm. Which is true enough, I suppose, but that's not the point. OK, fine, the kid's home. But I say, let him experience the consequences of his folly. Let him be a field hand. He sure wasn't interested in being a faithful son. Sure, forgive him some day, once it's clear he's learned his lesson. But not until there is clear evidence that he gets depth of his guilt and depravity. Am I right? Damn straight I'm right.

Nah, go on in. Have some prime rib. Might as well, the whole village is here eating and drinking. We sure won't be getting much work done tomorrow with the hangovers this crowd will

have. There's dad over there. The one waving at us. Look how happy he is. I haven't seen him look like that since...well...since the kid left. Oh I don't get it. I thought what he wanted was a son who did what he was told, who honored him. Yeah, Dad, I see you. No, I'm good out here. What? No, don't come out. Don't come out. Great. Yeah, come on out. You are not gonna give up, are you? You are bound and determined to have me join that party of yours aren't you?

Oh my God. OH. MY. GOD. THAT'S what you want! You want ME at the party. Me AND him. That's all you've ever wanted isn't it? For us all to be together? Wow. Well...I must say...that prime rib does smell pretty good.