

In his book "Shepherds and Bathrobes," Thomas Long tells the following story:

"I was once staying in a motel in a large city and was surprised to find, posted to the elevator door, a small handwritten notice that read, "Party Tonight! Room 210. 8:00p.m. Everyone invited!" I could hardly picture who would throw such a party, or for what reason, but I imagined that at 8:00, room 210 would be filled by an unlikely assortment of people-sales representatives seeking a little relief from the tedium of the road; a vacationing couple tired of sightseeing; a person stopping overnight in the middle of a long journey, looking for a bit of festivity; a few inquisitive and wary motel employees, there because of professional responsibility; perhaps some young people who had slipped out of their parents' rooms, anxiously curious about what was happening in room 210.

But alas, the sign by the elevator soon came down, replaced by a typewritten statement from the motel staff explaining that the original notice was a hoax, a practical joke. That made sense, of course, but in a way it was too bad. For a brief moment, those of us staying at the motel were tantalized by the possibility that there just might be a party going on somewhere to which we were all invited-a party where it did not make much difference who we were when we walked in the door, or what motivated us to come; a party we could come to out of boredom, loneliness, curiosity, responsibility, eagerness to be in fellowship, or simply out of a desire to come and see what was happening; a party where it didn't matter nearly as much what got us in the door, as what would happen to us after we arrived. Perhaps if there is to be such a party, the church is going to have to throw it."¹

The parable of the Prodigal Son is told by Jesus in response to the under-the-breath grumblings of the religious leaders. They are appalled that Jesus would associate with people considered to be sinners like tax collectors, who were viewed by many as traitors to their own people. Collecting taxes on behalf of the Roman Empire and in many cases lining their pockets by gouging their fellow Jews. Not only was Jesus

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes: Sermons for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Company, 1987).

reaching out to these “sinners” but he was eating with them! This behavior was unbecoming of a righteous person and certainly was not acceptable for someone people hoped was the Messiah.

So Jesus tells three stories, the third of which is our text for this morning. In this story we encounter a wealthy landowner and his two sons. The youngest son demands his portion of his inheritance, he doesn't ask politely, he says “give me my share.” Similar to our modern tradition, in first century Jewish culture, an inheritance would be something a son would receive upon the death of their father. But the youngest son disrespects this tradition and asks for his portion of the estate now. In a very real sense, the son is saying to his father “I wish you were dead.” In the patriarchal culture of the ancient Jews, this was extremely disrespectful. It's a pretty disrespectful request in today's culture. First century Jews believed their ancestral lands were a gift from God to their families. Not only were the actions of the son an affront to his father, the original hearers of this story would have viewed his actions as an affront to God.² So the son has disrespected his family, insulted his faith tradition and disrespected God. This was an act that would have brought great shame on this well-to-do family. What is a father to do? Some fathers would have disowned their son for even making this request. Others may have punished him in some way. But not the father in Jesus' story.

While the father had no obligation to give him what he asked for, he goes ahead and divvies up the property. The youngest son liquidates his portion and heads off for new adventures. But this new life doesn't go quite as planned. This spoiled rich boy blows all of his money on what our translator calls “wild living”. Other translations say dissolute living, riotous living, and extravagant living. We don't know the details of this young man's new lifestyle, but we know that the money ran out. And then a famine hit. With no savings, the son is forced to take a job that no Jew would have even considered if they had any other choice – feeding pigs. Pigs were considered unclean and not only does this man feed them, but he wishes he could eat their food because he

² David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, vol. Year C, Volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

is so hungry. The starvation and humiliation, seems to bring him to his senses and he decides to return home.

He rehearses what he will say to his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." We might wonder if he is rehearsing this speech because he is nervous about returning home. He certainly has reason to be nervous. He had every reason to believe that his father had disowned him and would want nothing to do with him. Or was this speech an attempt to manipulate his father? Nothing in the text necessarily points to a change of heart in the son. There is no indication that he feels remorse or shame or that he wants to atone for his actions in any way. But as he approaches his father's land, none of that matters. His father sees him coming from a distance and runs out to greet him and lavishes love upon him. This action was scandalous. No Palestinian patriarch of that time would be caught dead running out to greet anyone much less a son who had treated them with such disrespect. But this father, who in this story told by Jesus represents the divine Father and Mother of us all, doesn't wait for an explanation or an apology. He doesn't care if the son is back because he regrets his actions or just ran out of money. It doesn't matter that his son has been living an immoral and sinful life. The only thing that matters to this man, is that his son came home.

The son begins his rehearsed speech, but his father doesn't let him finish. Once he mentions his feelings of unworthiness, his father cuts him off. Instead of treating him like a hired hand, the father treats him like royalty and throws an extravagant party and everyone's invited! Like the father in the story, God is looking for God's children on the horizon. God is on the lookout for those children who have chosen to put distance between themselves and God for whatever reason. We have all done this to some degree. Whether through the way we treat other people or the priorities we hold. At one point or another I would venture to guess that most of us have found ourselves feeling estranged from God or at the very least, unaware of God's presence in our lives.

But when we come home to God, God is not only waiting for us, but runs out to meet us. God has been there all along, waiting for us to come home.

But the story doesn't end with the prodigal son's return. It easily could have. Jesus has made his point that God's grace and love knows no bounds. It does not ask for motive or for promises, God's grace simply wants us to come home. But Jesus has more to say. The older brother enters the story and is furious that his younger brother has been thrown such an extravagant party after treating the family with such disrespect. We can all relate to this guy right? He has worked hard, remained loyal to his father, he has never asked for any special treatment, he has been a good son. Then his reckless and self-entitled spoiled brat of a brother is welcomed home with a lavish feast! How is that fair? At this point, the oldest son is on the verge of becoming lost himself. He refuses to go in and join the party and to celebrate that his long lost brother has rejoined the family. Just as his father ran out to his younger son, the father now leaves the party to seek out his oldest son. Again the father shows an extravagant amount of grace and compassion. He listens to his son's temper tantrum and then responds not with reprimand for the son's disrespect, but with assurance: "you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

And then the story ends. We have no idea if the older brother decides to join the feast, or goes off to sulk, or maybe he chooses to liquidate his portion of the estate and leaves his family behind in a cloud of anger and resentment. In finishing the story without an ending, Jesus seems to be posing this question to the Pharisees and the scribes. Are you going to join the party or stand outside and pass judgement on who got invited? I think a similar question is being posed to us, church.

God is throwing an extravagant party right here at First Congregational UCC in Brainerd, Minnesota. But this thing is, it's not our party. We are not the ones handing out the invitations. God is out there recklessly giving invitations to anyone who wants one. These people may not look like you, or talk like you, or dress like you, or even vote like you. They may not live their life the way you think they should. They may have

mental health issues, or addictions, or swear like a sailor, or have crippling gambling debt. Maybe, they've never been to church and don't know all the unspoken rules about when to stand or how to take communion. But here's the thing, it's not our party. No one hired us to be bouncers. Like the father of the prodigal son, God shows all of us what one scholar calls "scandalous grace."³ A grace that defies our human sense of fairness and worthiness. God is putting flyers in elevators all over town inviting people to our hotel room, and She is asking us to run out to greet them with open arms. There is no dress code, or cover charge. There's no secret handshake or password. God's party only requires that people show up. What happens next is up to us.

³ Ibid.