

A Reason to Dance

Luke 15.11-32 (The Message)

September 18, 2011

We see the Church as a circle of persons holding hands... and dancing... supporting each other, accepting each other, loving each other. Each person in this dancing circle is facing outward... reaching into God's world, listening for the whimpering, watching for the hurting, willing to offer a cup of cold water in His name.

- From *This Church*, by Ann Weems (adapted)

Then he said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.' "So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any. "That brought him to his senses. He said, 'All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.' He got right up and went home to his father. "When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.' "But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time. "All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.' "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!' "His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"

And they began to have a wonderful time. That's what the story says. There was song, dance, and merry feasting. They had a reason to dance, this father and his once-prodigal son, because daddy's boy had come home, and where there had been conflict and estrangement, there was now reconciliation and unity. They had a reason to dance and we do as well, because the joy of father and son in this parable is the joy of faith that is – or can be - ours as well. In faith there is a reason to dance and make merry; so much is affirmed in today's invitation to worship, which poses the question, if the news is good, why aren't we dancing?

Why aren't we dancing? That's a good question. If we're not dancing, perhaps it's because we identify more with the rebellious, prodigal son in his wild and carefree stage than with his contrite counterpart later in the story. That is to say, perhaps we haven't come home. Or, perhaps it's because we identify with the older brother whose last scene finds him standing outside the feast listening to the merriment, but refusing to join in; proof positive that you can be home without feeling at home. Why aren't we dancing? That is the question on which we will reflect this morning in relation to the story of the prodigal son.

His story reminds me of someone I once knew. Let's call him Travis. His friends called him "Big Orange" because he had a big shock of red hair. Travis came from a broken home, and was serenaded all of his life with a chorus of accusation and blame directed at his father. His father, so the song went, was the cause of the broken home. His father was the cause of the rift in the family and, worse, his father had abandoned him and practically renounced him as a son.

Travis grew up in this poisonous atmosphere, and was affected by it, but for the family's sake he maintained some relationship with his dad and his new family. From time to time he would spend a weekend with them, accompany them on an outing to the lake, or travel with them on vacation. But the relationship was always tense, anger seethed just beneath the surface, and over the years the rift widened.

Travis grew farther apart from his family; after the death of his mother the only family he had. He forgot about the wonderful things that they had done for him over the years that indicated their love, the way they had attempted to embrace him in the family. He forgot about trips to the river for fly fishing, a passion he shared with his dad, on which there was always red-eye gravy and biscuits. He forgot about family vacations. On one in particular, they had driven all around Tampa, Florida looking for a motel with a swimming pool because that's what the kids

wanted. Dad did this out of love, even if begrudgingly, because he thought it silly to pay more for a swimming pool with the ocean scant feet away. Travis buried these memories, along with those of his dad's many efforts to reconcile with his son. He and his wife made countless efforts to pull him in; to convince him of their love; and to accept his place in the family. But this Travis couldn't do. The rift was too deep, the separation too wide for him to cross; so Travis slowly disappeared from the life of his family.

As a young man Travis served in the Army, and spent much of his service abroad – in France to be precise– and there experienced the loneliness and longing for home that only an ocean's distance can inspire. He was a stranger in a strange land. He was surprised when he realized that he missed his family, including his dad. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps I have been too hard on dad. Maybe I should listen to his side of the story, perhaps I should return home and try to patch things up.

So Travis decided that when his tour of duty was over he would do just that; go home. In his youthful enthusiasm he didn't think to call ahead to make sure anyone was home or, more to the point, to make sure they would welcome him back. He just showed up one day. And as he regarded the house from the street, his confidence left him, replaced by nagging questions. What if they saw him standing outside and quietly closed the curtains? What if they ignored the doorbell? With such questions he slowly approached the front porch, and found himself face to face with the doorbell. He reached out his hand, poised to ring the bell, and felt a surge of excitement mixed with fear.

It is clear that Travis' story has a lot in common with that of the prodigal; but you may be surprised to learn that there's another story that shares much in common with both. According to one Christian theologian, John Cobb, the story of the Church in decline in America is much like that of the prodigal; and we could add that of Travis. According to Cobb, the Church is in decline because we've forgotten our first love. We have forgotten that there really is good news in the gospel. In other words, we've forgotten how to dance. It could be that the good news has grown stale and faded from our consciousness. Or, it could be that we just take it for granted. We go about being church in ways that are forced and shallow but to be honest, we have forgotten how to dance; we've forgotten any reason we once had to feast and make merry.

Like the prodigal; like our friend Travis, we need discover anew a reason to dance. It's really simple; all we have to do is go home. All we have to do is take the route of the prodigal. You know

what he did; he decided that despite everything he had done, despite the fact that he could never look his father in the eye or expect to be embraced as a full part of the family, he could go home. He was lonely. He missed his dad. He even missed that sullen older brother of his ...so he made his way home. But he didn't make it all the way. Before he could approach his home, his daddy rushed out to greet him, embraced him in love, and gave him a reason to dance. Feeling his dad's love gave him a reason to celebrate, feast, and sing; a reason to express the joy of the renewed relationship he had with his daddy.

Travis stood on his dad's porch with his finger extended, ready to push the doorbell. But he never made it. His step mom saw him through the window and called excitedly to her husband in the garden. "Dad; Travis is on the front porch." And dad wasted no time. He bounded around the house onto the porch, and before Travis could ring the bell, he descended on him with a big ol' bear hug. It never occurred to him at the time that his son had been rude and rebellious, or had once completely rejected his love. It never occurred to him to remember just how horrible his son had made him feel. None of that occurred to him. He had but one thought; my son was lost, but now he's found. He released Travis from his hug, let him take a deep breath, and said, "Welcome home, son."

Travis' daddy gave him a reason to dance, just like the prodigal's dad, and God will give us a reason to dance anytime we let ourselves stand in God's presence as the parable invites us to do, and make the decision to go home. We can accept God's loving embrace and find a reason to dance, feast, and be joyful ...or, like the older brother, we can stand outside, alone. We can smell the aroma, hear the singing, laughter, and gaiety; all the while begrudging what daddy has done for other, less deserving children. The choice is ours. Shall we dance?