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“A Surprise Party”
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2010

Josh. 5:9–12; Ps. 32; 2 Cor. 5:16–21; Lk. 15:1–3, 11b–32

Gracious God, we thank you for the stories and Scripture. Open them up that they might reveal who you are and who we are and what it means to live faithfully in your presence and to work for the coming of your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. All this we pray in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

When you hear that the Scripture reading for today is the parable of the prodigal son, you might say, “Ho hum. I’ve heard that story before. I know it.” It is probably the most familiar and beloved story in Scripture. The problem is that sometimes things can be too familiar. We take them for granted, and they lose their power to transform us. They become domesticated, like teddy bears you carry around, like the one Sean brought with him today for his baptism. They become so familiar that we don’t recognize their value. These stories become as we do: captive to our culture.

When you think about this parable, what comes to mind—a son leaving home, taking his inheritance, running into tough times, losing his inheritance, deciding to come home, a forgiving father, an unforgiving older son—all of these elements are familiar. They have happened in our families or at least to someone we know.

There is no surprise. I left out the part about the party. There was a party. That seems like a surprise, doesn’t it? It did then, and it does now: the music, dancing,

eating, and drinking. It sounds a little un-Presbyterian. You may have heard the definition of our ancestors, the Puritans. A Puritan is someone who is afraid there is somebody somewhere having a good time.

When I was a seminary student, I served as youth minister at Decatur Presbyterian Church. It is right down the street from Agnes Scott College, a Presbyterian women's college where Rob Parker now works. There was a close relationship between the college and the church. A former president of the college, Dr. James Ross McCain, was very active in the Decatur Presbyterian Church. He was a highly respected leader in the church. He had been the moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. In his retirement, he took a week every year and went with the youth for a week-long camp in the North Georgia Mountains, Camp Decatur it was called. As the youth minister, I was the director of Camp Decatur. In fact, Carlisle and I spent our first wedding anniversary with 150 young people at Camp Decatur. She still remembers it vividly! During one of the camps I had directed, I had planned a Square Dance for one evening, and Dr. McCain, who was a very kind and gentle man, pulled me aside and suggested that dancing at a Presbyterian youth camp might be a little inappropriate.

It does seem inappropriate in Lent: dancing and music. This is supposed to be a somber time, a time for us to reflect on our lives. But when you dig deeper in this story, the inappropriateness of the party grows even stronger.

In the culture of Jesus' day, what the younger son did was terrible. A family lived on the land of their ancestors. It was passed down from generation to generation. Your identity and your honor were tied to your family and your land. Those of us from the South know something about that. People want to know who you are; they want to know who your mother and daddy are, who your people are. She is a Lowell. Oh, you know the Lowells; they're good people.

I understand the whole family thing, family name, family history, family standing in the community. But there was something else in the Middle Eastern world where Jesus lived—the patriarch of a family was honored, and there was a code for keeping that honor in place. When guests would come, he would never leave his place at the head of the table. The guests would be presented to him. Patriarchs did

not plead with their children about anything; the patriarch told the children what to do—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. You did what your father said to do.

So when the son asked his father for his share of the family property, it is a double whammy—he not only breaks up the family estate, which was the source of their identity and their place in the community, he leaves his father, who is counting on him to care for him in his old age. Now there would only be one son there to take care of the parents. To make matters worse, the son squandered his inheritance among Gentiles. This boy from a good Jewish family was now working with pigs. It couldn't get any worse than that.

What he did was so reprehensible. If you look at this wonderful picture at the front of the bulletin, you see the four other people in the background. This wasn't only about a father's and son's relationship. This was about the community. If a Jewish son did what the prodigal did, broke up the family estate, took the inheritance and squandered it among Gentiles, the Jews have a ceremony for him if he ever came home. They took a jar full of burned corn and nuts, broke it in front of the prodigal son, and shouted out his name, saying that he was banished from the community, no longer deserving to live among them.

This prodigal son was so desperate that he risked the scorn of the community because he wanted food and shelter. He must have had faith in his father. On the way home, he rehearsed his confession: "Father, I've sinned against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." He pictured going into the home, kneeling before his father, who would be at the head of the table, and making his confession, throwing himself at the mercy of his father.

Aristotle once wrote, "Great men never run in public." They stay at the head of the table. But when the father sees his son coming, he leaves the seat of power and authority. He gets up and runs to meet him for the whole community to see; he's out there, running to meet his son. It is out of affection for his son and also to protect him from the curse that would be placed on him by the community. He wants to beat the crowd to his son whom he loves. He takes his best robe, a ring, a sign of power, and sandals, a sign of dignity, and places them on his son. And then

he orders the fattened calf to be killed, and music and dance—yes, indeed. It was quite a surprise party.

We have misnamed this parable. It is not the parable of the prodigal son but the parable of the parent who had two sons. He gets up and goes out, not just to the prodigal, but to the elder son, too. He wants him to come to the table. You remember the elder brother was angry: “I’ve been here all the time; I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to do.” The father says, “Come in to the party.” The elder son says, “You’ve never given a party for me.” The father says, “There’s been a party going on for you all your life. Come in.” You see, the parent in the parable wants both sons at the table. He wants all of us at the table: tax-collectors, sinners, Pharisees, Publicans, Republicans, Democrats, rich, poor, gays, straight. He wants us all there. This is a story about God, who in Jesus Christ came to reconcile the world to himself. He goes out to all of us. Reconciliation is at the top of God’s priority list. God will go to any length or depth to bring us together.

Reconciliation is about reaching out, even when it requires sacrifice, laying aside our positions: our prestige, our comfort. The issue is not whether or not we attend the surprise party, not if we are serious about being disciples of Jesus Christ. God is counting on us coming to the party. In fact, Paul goes on to say in 2 Corinthians, God has made us agents of reconciliation. We are hosts at the party of God’s reconciling love. This reconciliation work is not easy. It is one we are called upon to do in our families, in our communities, and indeed, around the world. It’s not easy work. It requires sacrifice and commitment. But when it happens, a party breaks out—a surprise party on earth, as it is in heaven.

Thanks be to God.