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Sermon—31Mar19
Luke 15
“Dinner at Wolfgang’s”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

One of the most popular new restaurants in this neighborhood is a type of restaurant that a few years ago seemed to be going out of business: the steakhouse.

In recent years, New Yorkers had preferred international cuisine over meat from the American heartland. Moreover, steak is expensive, and too much of it can be threatening to the arteries!

Even so, the steakhouse has once again become popular. Why? Well, I would guess that a big reason for the success is that when you go out to such a place, you go with a sense of celebration.

The crowds that pack Wolfgang’s on Park Avenue and 33rd Street are well-aware that they will be spending a lot of money for something they shouldn’t eat every day. But that is precisely why they come.

The steaks and the crowds give you a sense of luxury that is just right for a celebration.

So people come to Wolfgang’s after they have closed a business deal, or so they can entertain friends from out of town. You might have also noticed a sense of celebration when you heard the gospel read just now. For the Parable of the Prodigal son ends with a feast.

The father of the Prodigal Son has decided to celebrate the son’s return by putting on a lavish dinner. The father even chooses an ancient equivalent of a big steak; as the Bible puts it, he “kills the fatted calf.”

(We may note in passing that the Bible knows what it’s talking about. With regard to the reference to “fatted:” our best steakhouses are expensive because that offer meat that is “marbled” with layers of fat. Such meat tastes great, but it’s more costly to produce.)

Unfortunately, there’s one person at the party in the Gospel who is not in the party mood. The older brother of the Prodigal Son thinks that his father’s extravagant gesture is unfair to him. The elder brother has never been given a festive dinner—and yet, the older brother has always done what his father wanted him to do.

He has protected his father’s wealth instead of squandering it in “dissolute living”—as his younger brother wasted his inheritance.

And the older brother has a point. Commentators have noted that this parable could also be called, “The Parable of the Older Brother”—because it is so easy for the reader to sympathize with the brother’s complaint.

We can understand why the good son feels under-appreciated. His years of hard work have never merited a feast; his father apparently didn’t even offer him a much cheaper young goat! (Goat meat is rarely on the menu at Wolfgang’s!)

His younger brother, on the other hand, had squandered half their father’s fortune; the Prodigal Son had ended up in the gutter, envying the pigs the miserable food they were fed.

However, in the father’s defense, we should note that the father has promised all the property he has left to his older son. Even if he hasn’t shown his love, he clearly loves the good son: “all that is mine is yours,” he says.

But the key to the story is the second part of the father’s defense of his actions: “...we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found.”

“We had to celebrate...” The return of the Prodigal Son is such a precious gift that the father must respond. So he organizes a feast to demonstrate his gratitude and share his joy.

And since the story is a parable, we should expect that Jesus has a much larger lesson in mind. The generosity of the father should remind us of nothing less than the generosity of God.

God’s generosity extends beyond fatted calves and steak dinners. The parable might even be said to foreshadow Christ’s own resurrection, when Jesus was brought to life again. Dead on the cross at Golgotha and buried in the Tomb, Jesus was restored to God the Father, and to us.

That is why Sundays aren’t part of Lent. Every Sunday commemorates the resurrection, these days can’t be included in a penitential season. We can only be happy when we recall the gift Jesus received from God.

I am struck in particular by that remark by the father of the Prodigal Son: “we had to celebrate and rejoice...” Like the family of the Prodigal Son, we Christians must celebrate. There can be no fasting when we remember the triumph of God in Jesus, “who once was dead and has come to life...”

Unfortunately, this isn’t how we Christians have always practiced our religion. We have often concentrated too much on the duties of religion: the tasks we have to perform in God’s service.

We have sometimes worried so much about what we should do, and about what we have left undone, that we ourselves have forgotten to enjoy ourselves!

The classic example of the refusal to celebrate was the Puritan movement and its decision to ban the celebration of Christmas.

I hesitate to admit it, but this refusal to celebrate still can be found in the customs of the ethnic group that is still sometimes associated with these Puritans. Members of my Mother’s family of Massachusetts Protestants, for example, weren’t very good at celebrating things.

New Englanders of our sort tended to be frugal, for one thing—and it takes money to buy fatted calves! Since we New Englanders don’t like to spend, our choices of what we can do to celebrate are limited.

Even more seriously, those of us who have trouble celebrating should ask ourselves whether our hesitation to have fun comes from a deeper reticence about enjoying life!

In turn, we may hesitate because we sub-consciously question whether we deserve the blessing of God’s creation. It’s also possible that we value the wrong things.

The older son in the Parable was so concerned with getting equal attention with his brother that he missed the miraculous return of his brother from poverty and degradation—his return from a kind of living death.

New England Protestants, for example, can worry so much about what they perceive to be their social position that they fail to notice the every day blessings that God gives to all his people.

Is it inappropriate to think of celebrating during the penitential season of Lent? The answer to that question is that surely we should give thanks for the generosity of God every season.

Lent may, in fact, be an especially good time to think of celebrating. For in this season, we are sorry for our sins. And that’s an empty feeling unless it is followed by a confidence that God forgives us for those sins.

Being sorry is a somber duty: but absolution is an undeserved blessing.

So as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ from death to life every Sunday, we give thanks to the God for whom, whatever we do, we are never lost. We give thanks to the God who rejoices with us when we offer our lives to him.

And now unto that same Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion and praise, now and forever, Amen.