

“They Began to Celebrate”
Luke 15:11-32
13th Sunday after Pentecost

August 22, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Our sermon series this fall is entitled “Once Upon a Time,” which immediately calls to mind fairy tales. Now I don’t think the parables of Jesus should be categorized as fairy tales...but there is a fascinating connection.

I learned something on a recent podcast about the history of fairy tales.

Malcolm Gladwell interviewed an individual names Angus Fletcher. Dr. Fletcher is an award-winning teacher and author.

And Dr. Fletcher describes how there are basically TWO TYPES of fairy tales that have been written throughout history.

One type is the kind that Disney has adopted. Fletcher calls it “Poetic Justice.”

It’s when the hero of the story, who is good, receives good in the end.

Think of Walt Disney’s classic Cinderella, in which Cinderella, despite her evil step-mother and step-sisters, shows that the glass slipper fits and marries the handsome prince.

The other type of fairy tale, according to Fletcher, is an earlier kind. Back in the 16th century, an Italian writer named Giovanni Straparola wrote a two-volume collection containing 75 stories.

In Straparola’s fairy tales, good does NOT necessarily happen to good people.

Good happens to FOOLS.
 Or to people who are unkind, or selfish.
 Angus Fletcher calls these “Fairy Tale Twist” stories.

One example is the story of Adamantina. Adamantina’s family is starving, and she is sent by the family to buy food at the market. She goes with the family’s last coin, but instead of buying food, Adamantina makes a whimsical purchase of a doll.

She takes the doll home, and her older sister is distraught.
 It’s the end of the family, Adamantina’s selfishness has ruined the family.

Only the doll turns out to be a magic doll, which spits out money for the family...in other words, Adamantina does not deserve what she has received.

She’s not virtuous, she’s not thoughtful.
 And yet GOOD comes to someone who did something...not so good.

What’s fascinating is that Dr. Fletcher did some research, and found out that children gave a more positive response to FAIRY TALE TWIST stories...¹

Now I don’t think Jesus had fairy tale twist stories in mind when he told today’s parable. But...if I can mix fairy tale genres here—the shoe fits!

Good does not come from good in today’s parable.
 There is no poetic justice for the younger brother.

¹ As told on Malcolm Gladwell’s podcast, “Revisionist History,” 2021: The Little Mermaid, Episode 2, The Fairy Tale Twist.

There's a party.

And it's the party in this story that turns everyone's world UPSIDE DOWN. Why? You know why!

It was the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia who remarked in a lecture at Harvard years ago:

“Parents know that children will accept quite readily all sorts of arbitrary...[rules] — no television in the afternoon, or no television in the evening, or even no television at all. But try to let one brother or sister watch television when the others do not, and you will feel the fury of the fundamental sense of justice unleashed.”²

I think it's safe to say that the older brother in our story KNOWS THAT FURY...

The parable of the prodigal son is often described as a parable about forgiveness, as a parable about lost and found.

And it is.

But you know what else it's about?
It's about justice!

What happens when good falls in the lap of someone who did not deserve it?

Or at the very least, the good that someone else receives is what you think you really deserve as well?

² Adam Liptak, “Antonin Scalia, Justice on the Supreme Court, Dies at 79,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2016.

Years ago, when I was working with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in my first year out of college, I was a paralegal with a poverty law agency in Hartford, Connecticut.

It was a volunteer position—we got a paid a little more than \$400/month.

And because I lived with a handful of other volunteers with JVC, we pooled our paychecks together to pay for rent, for food, for utilities...and that was about it.

I remember at one point, about 10 or 11 months into my volunteer year, some law school interns were brought into the law office at which I was working. They were there for the summer, three of them, if memory serves.

One day that summer, the director of the law office was standing outside my office, only he was talking with the three summer interns. My door was open. And I overheard him telling the summer interns that the Hartford newspaper was doing a story on people who gave their time for a worthy cause, and he had shared their names with the paper, they could be expecting a call.

They would get a write-up, a story in the paper...

And my mouth hit the floor.

They were there for the summer.

I had been working at Neighborhood Legal Services for close to a year.

How could he reward THEM with a story in the paper instead of ME??!!

You see, I get where the older brother is coming from.

“For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends...”

Do you see what he’s saying to his dad?

This party that you’re throwing...it’s not right, it’s not fair, it’s not JUST.

If God behaves the way the father in this story behaves, then this story invites us to consider *what the justice of God looks like...*

But it also invites us to do something else.

Do you recall the father’s response to his oldest son?

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice...”

We had to celebrate.

In other words, this is also a parable that teaches us not only what *the justice* of God might look like, but *what the joy of God looks like*.

Getting back to that summer after college when I was a volunteer.

What’s interesting to me now, almost 30 years later, is how I viewed my life at that time. I saw myself as a hard worker. I saw that year as a way of essentially giving my time, my energy, my abilities in service to people in poverty, and for a greater good.

And I suppose, in a way, it was all those things.

But all these years later, what I've come to see much more clearly is not what I gave, but what I received.

It was the year that I decided to go to seminary.

Not because it was my idea, but because another pastor planted the seed in me and encouraged me to go.

It was a year in which I learned—by working with people who spent every day in poverty—what it truly meant to live in poverty.

And I saw first-hand what it meant to be sick. Most of my clients were people with HIV/AIDS, in the days before there was the kind of treatment there is today. I represented them in their cases for Social Security benefits, and in a way I never had seen so close up, I came to learn how fragile life could be.

And I also saw, in a very tangible way, how life itself is a gift.

In hindsight, it was a year in which I received much more than I gave. I was blessed by many gifts, by the people with whom I worked and who I worked for...and I didn't notice everything I was receiving at the time.

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever received gift after gift, but you didn't notice it?

Because the NOISE of the world or the noise in your head just kind of drowned out your ability to hear and see and experience the gifts that God was giving you?

Let me get at it like this.

I read a story a few years ago about the composer George Gershwin. Once, while on a train from New York to Boston, Gershwin was inspired to compose the major portion of "Rhapsody in Blue."

It was on that train, of all places—
 with its steely rhythms and its click-clack regularity of sound
 the bells and whistles and all of the other distractions
 that Gershwin was inspired
 and suddenly heard the complete construction
 of the "Rhapsody" from beginning to end.

Much later, Gershwin made this remark:
"I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise."³

Not a bad way to think about this parable.

There's a lot of noise going on in the older brother's head.
 I didn't get this, how could he get that...it's all about deserve,
 deserve, deserve.

Do you ever think that way?

What's the noise that's going on in your head, that might be
 preventing you from experiencing God's joy?

Is it the compulsive feeling to accomplish this, do that, never get
 off the cycle of moving up the ladder of life?

³ This story comes from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw, "The Stewardship of Praise," August 31, 1997, www.day1.org.

Is it the voice that tells you to worry about this, and worry about that, because if you weren't worrying about something you don't know what you'd do?

Or maybe the noise is the grudge that you hold, the wound that you nurse, and there's a bitterness that's been forming in your heart...

I've shared this with you once before.

It's sort of a modern-day parable about justice and joy.

The retired professor of preaching, Tom Long, describes a "brush with the law" that he had a few years ago.

Pulling out of a gas station, he had to cross four lanes of traffic to get into the left-turn lane. But before he could complete the maneuver, traffic stopped, and his car was stuck in between two lanes—
the nose of the car in one,
the tail of the car in another.

To his astonishment, Tom Long then saw police lights in the rear-view mirror. The policeman got out, wrote a ticket, and said, "You are impeding the flow of traffic, you have violated section 62.130 of the [state] code."

"What is that?" Long asked.

"Look it up in the library," the officer replied.

So he did.

Long says he went to the library, read the code in question, and came to the conclusion that he had NOT impeded the flow of traffic.

So he challenged the ticket.

A court date was set.

Tom Long got on the Internet, he did more research, and he entered the courtroom on the appropriate date with a file folder TWO INCHES THICK to prove he had done nothing wrong.

When the time came, the judge called him to the bench.

“The officer who wrote your ticket is no longer employed by the county,” said the judge.

“There is no one here to bear witness against you. You are free to go.”

And Tom Long says that he did not jump for joy.
Why? Because something inside of him wanted to scream:

WAIT! You can't dismiss my case like this!
I have a file folder that PROVES I'm innocent!

And it may have been true.
He may not have broken the law.

But at that moment, when the judge simply let him go, Long says he had something of a revelation. What he saw very clearly at that moment was that there was something inside of him that would “rather win the fight than be blessed by grace.”⁴

Do you recognize that instinct?
The determination to win the fight instead of being blessed by grace?

⁴ Thomas G. Long, “Down by the River,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2009.

The next time you and I hear the music, the music that beckons us to reconciliation and new life—will we stay in the field, arms crossed, arguing with God, listening to whatever noise is in our heads?

Or will we be blessed by grace,
and start walking toward the music?

Amen.