



## Sermon

March 14, 2010  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Luke 15: 1-3; 11b-32  
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### Invitation to Joy

Rummaging through some old folders, I came across this rendering of today's gospel text. When you hear it, you'll understand why it's called "*The Parable of the Prodigal Son in 'F.'*"

*Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow forced his fond father to force over the family finances. He flew to foreign lands and frittered his fortune feasting fabulously with faithless friends.*

*Finally, facing famine and fleeced by his fellows in folly, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy farmyard. Fairly famished he fain would have filled his frame with foraged foods of the fodder, fragments left by filthy farmyard creatures.*

*"Fooley," he said. "My father's flunkies fare far fancier," the frazzled fugitive found feverishly, frankly facing facts. Frustrated by failure and filled with foreboding he forthwith fled for his family. Falling at his father's feet, he floundered forlornly, "Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor. But the faithful father, forestalling further flinching, frantically flagged his flunkies.*

*But the fugitive's fault finding frater frowned on the fickle forgiveness of former folderol. His fury flashed. But fussing was futile for the far sighted father figured such filial fidelity is fine, but what forbids fervent festivity!*

*The fugitive is found! "Unfurl the flags with fanfare flaring! Let fun and frolic freely flow!" Former failure is forgotten... forgiveness forms the foundation of future fortitude.*

-- *The Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Key of "F,"* Anonymous

*But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him... put a ring on his fingers and sandals on his feet...get the fattened calf and kill it... let us eat and celebrate... this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:22-24 NRSV*

Let us pray.

O God, tell us what we need to hear, and show us what we ought to do to follow Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the first Bible verses I memorized as a child was "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" (Psalm 122:1)

Joy is what we sang about in children's assembly before going to Sunday School class. (Singing) "The joy of the Lord is my strength..." and "I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart..." Teachers gathered us reciting "I was glad when they said to me..." and primed us for the day's lesson singing about joy because Christians are supposed to be happy people.

They should have been at my house getting ready for Sunday School. The only thing higher than the family's stress level getting out the door ON TIME was the pitch of my mother's voice. Church was going to be its usual: long, dull and boring. Dressed in don't-you-dare-muss-these-up Sunday clothes and stiff shoes the course of the day ahead was set. The *Three Stooges* and all the good kid shows were on the TV when we'd head to St. James. I was not at all glad when they said unto me, "Let us go into the house of

the Lord.” A few years later, a teenager, I was even MAD when they said to me “Let us go into the house of the Lord.” The only day I’d be “glad” about this church stuff would be when I’d be grown up enough so the magic that made adults “glad” to go into the house of the Lord dawn on me.

Imagine the disappointment when I became an adult and discovered that not many adults “Unfurl the flags with fanfare flaring! Let fun and frolic freely flow!” type joy at church either. Polite smiles and warm fuzzies, yeah. But I’m talking about the knock-down, drag-out party there was the day the stray came home.

I don’t want to overstate this. There are many occasions for adults and children alike when hymns rouse, solos soar, sermons inspire, prayers touch hearts, and communion feeds deep hungering and there is something to be enthused about. Times we leave saying, “I was glad...” There are also occasions and people who have quit the church or quit on faith because the joy expected or needed isn’t there.

Once Groucho Marx was approached by a priest who greeted him, thanking him profusely for the joy his comedy gave world. The quick-witted Groucho replied, “And Father, I’d like to thank you for all the joy you’ve taken OUT of this world.”

The parable of the prodigal son – the best known parable in Christian scripture – offers many insights into what Jesus wants people to know about God. One of those insights challenges us to think about God’s joy and the state of it in God’s household.

There’s an old rabbinic story about two brothers in the flour milling business. One is married with children. The other is single. They were equal partners in the business. They have an agreement that at the end of each day they’d take the extra flour and divide it into equal shares. Each brother would take his share home to his store house.

But one day the older brother thinks: “Here I am unmarried with only myself to care for and my brother has a wife and children. It isn’t fair to

divide the flour equally. My brother should have more. So that night, he took from his storehouse and secretly left it in his brother’s storehouse.

It just so happened at the very same time, the married brother began to think, “Here I am with the blessing of my own family. I have a wife and children and my brother has no one to take care of him in old age. It’s not fair for the flour to be divided evenly. My brother should get more. So he took from his storehouse and slipped it into his brother’s storehouse.

Every night, unbeknownst to the other, each brother did this, always amazed at the how the level of flour in their storehouses never diminished. One night, their arms laden with sacks of flour, they bumped into each other in the darkness and realized what had been happening. With tears of joy they embraced.

The Rabbis say, God saw this and touched the spot on the earth where it happened and said, “This is where I will build my house because my house must always be a place of great joy.”

“...my house... a place of great joy...” We see people are willing to fight to defend the church doctrine, even go to battle royal for it. Faith gives guidance for living but oft times feels like heavy responsibility and obligation, more than joy. Some experience faith – their own or from others – as judging, shaming, condemning more than the freeing, overflowing, exhilarating, life-changing “the joy of heaven” Jesus mentions in the parable.

On Volunteer in Mission trips outside the USA, I have been a guest in the homes of church folk – literally ate, slept, worshipped and studied the Bible with people whose lives and perspectives are very different from my own. From Belize, Central America to South Africa I have been amazed and impressed with the discernable sense of joy in these people’s lives. Mostly they were very poor by our standards – one Sunday suit and another set for every day. Yet, their worship was full of more tangible joy and expectation than I expect or experience. I wonder about this for a while but always return to my old ways.

One day, says the Gospel of Luke, in the preface to everyone's favorite parable, Jesus had conversation with people having problems with joy. The Pharisees and scribes, who we have learned to think of as Jesus' nemesis, villains and ne'er-do-wells, were actually good people, faithful in the practice of prayer and worship. They honored the scripture and studied it. They fought against compromising faith to the prevailing culture. These good folk were having a problem with joy – grumbling about the company Jesus was keeping and his apparently delightful mood in so doing.

How does Jesus respond? He tells the griper stories about joy; a shepherd who lost one sheep out of one hundred and worried himself sick until he found it. Then he was overjoyed because the lost got found and the flock was whole. God is like that, Jesus said. A poor woman had but a few coins to her name so when she lost one it was a big deal. She turns her house upside down. Finding it, she throws a party. God is like that, Jesus said. A father's younger son asks for his half the family fortune, heads for points unknown, and spends his inheritance on high living. The kid comes back home begging to have his old room back. The father is so overjoyed; he doesn't even scold him but fills the house with music, feasting, and laughter. God is like that, Jesus said.

Sounds like wherever God IS there is joy in the house. Why? Because by God people "come to themselves;" because people find what they've been searching for; because people awaken to what matters most—not what they get but to grace they have been given. The household of God is a place of joy because it's not about how high you climb but how deeply, unconditionally you're loved.

But then something different and strange happens. The father comes outside the party to where an older brother is less than glad terms with all the joy in the air because while young blood frittered his life away, somebody else stayed home and made something of himself.

"What's wrong?" the father says. You know how the older sibling answered even if you've never been one. "You never gave a party for me. Damn you! I always wanted to be joy like this but you never gave me a party."

Then comes a stunning reply: "Child, you are always with me. Always! Everything I have is yours. Everything! There has always been a joyful party going on for you in my heart, in this place where we live, and you didn't know it. Or feel it. But it's always been there. Now c'mon into the house of joy."

Might the holy word here be about how we never fully experience the joy until we realize that we are all outsiders who have been invited into the party, through no merit of our own? Sometimes we are the younger one wasting our lives, sometimes we're the older one, and have worked hard, felt unappreciated, taken for granted with smoldering resentment of – "life is not fair." But the fact is we are both on the outside, and God is inviting us to the place of joy.

I came across this story. Reminiscing about her father, a woman remembered how when she was young, they were very close. She especially experienced this closeness at family gatherings when someone played music and everyone would dance the polka. Eventually "Beer Barrel Polka" would play and when did, her father would come and tap her on the shoulder and say, "I believe this is our dance." And they would dance.

One time when she was a teenager, the "Beer Barrel Polka" played at a family gathering. Dad tapped her in the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance." In one of those teenaged moods, she snapped. "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" And her father turned away, hurt and never asked her to dance any more.

"Our relationship changed that day – got more and more difficult through my teen years," she said. "I'd come home from a date, he'd be sitting in his chair, half asleep. I'd snarl at him, for waiting up for me. He would say he couldn't rest until he knew I was all right. When I went away to college, I was so glad to get out the house. For

years, I didn't communicate with him. But then I began to miss him."

Years later, the daughter went to a family gathering and someone put on "The Beer Barrel Polka." She took a deep breath walked over to her father and said, "I believe this is our dance." He turned towards her, she remembered, and said, "I've been waiting for you."

Standing at the center of our lives is God who says to us: "Everything I have is yours. All that I am is for you. I've been waiting for you. Come into my joy."

Or put another way, in the key of F: "The fugitive is found! Unfurl the flags with fanfare flaring! Let fun and frolic freely flow! Former failure is forgotten... forgiveness forms the foundation of future fortitude."

If that's not why the Bible says "joy of the Lord is our strength," (Nehemiah 8:10) then I don't know what the Bible means about anything.

God show us how to get over whatever is keeping us from the joy of your household, the joy of those who are glad to be in the house of the Lord.

Let the party begin.

■■■ Amen ■■■