

Pity Parties and Better Parties

Psalm 36:7-9; Proverbs 15:15; Luke 2:41-42; Luke 15: 25-32

(Life, including religious experiences, is celebratory by nature, though, being human, we also have “pity” parties.)

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By Carolyn Bohler

Redlands First United Methodist Church

[Walk up to pulpit. Luvi and Daniella sing and get the congregation to sing.]

Celebrate good times

Come on! – Let’s celebrate

Celebrate good times

Come on! - Let’s celebrate

There’s a party going on right here a celebration

To last throughout the years.

So bring your good times and your laughter, too.

We’re gonna celebrate your party with you.

Come on now (Celebration)

Let’s all celebrate and have a good time.

(Celebration)

We go celebrate and have a good time.¹

Is this an unusual way to begin a sermon? There’s no reason it should be unusual, for look at the scripture passages we just read!

Psalm 36—as plenty of psalms—names such an appreciation of God’s love that the people feast from God’s abundance and drink from “the river” of God’s delight. “How exquisite your love, O God!” They eat their fill at the banquet God spreads.

A dominant theme throughout our Bible is this: “Life is a celebration. There’s a party going on that lasts throughout the years . . . and it’s time to come together. . . Come on now. . . Celebrate!” We are *encouraged* to celebrate life.

There are difficult times. There is illness; there is poverty. There is conflict and estrangement between peoples—even wars. Our biblical tradition surely does *not deny* the horrible aspects of life. Yet, the Proverbs passage (15:15) that we just heard names the most frequent biblical response to life’s troubles: “**Even if the days are hard . . . a cheerful heart has a continual feast . . .**”

Come on now, Celebrate! What a great theme song. This is not a so-called “secular” theme song. It’s a dominant theme of our faith tradition.

Look at the vignette that presents an episode of Jesus’ childhood. Between the narratives of his birth and his ministry—we find one lone reference to Jesus as a 12 year-old. What are he and his family doing? They are traveling to Jerusalem for the *festival* of Passover. . .

When our family traveled a distance, usually to visit west-coast relatives, our kids were entertained by a hand-held electronic game called “Game Boy”; actually our kids shared one Game Boy in the back seat, passing it back and forth to each other. I think that children today who travel a distance with their families often watch a DVD from a car video screen—or a laptop! I don’t know what game Jesus and his younger siblings played as they traveled, but notice the naturalness, the normalness of this story.

The text reads, “AS USUAL”; “When he was 12 years old, they went up to the Feast ‘as usual.’” Every year, Jesus and his parents went to Jerusalem to do what? To

party! They weren't headed to clubs; they weren't planning to dance in the street; they were headed to feast in the TEMPLE. Our faith tradition encourages a celebration of life...and of God... even in the midst of troubles... and these festivities are at church, in the temple.

The very normalness of this event is noteworthy. It is right, good, and normal, to celebrate as part of our religious observance of life.

Let's now focus on the Scripture passage that is center stage for this morning—the *Parable of the Pity Party*. I know, we usually call this the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, but I, personally, do not like that title. The title itself is not “biblical,” though plenty of biblical publishers use the name “Parable of the Prodigal Son” for this passage.

Jesus told this parable not in order to tell us about the younger son who asked for his half of the inheritance and squandered it and then returned home to humbly ask to be received back, even as a servant. NO. NO. NO. This parable is one of three parables right in a row which describes GOD's response to us if we get lost. Jesus told this parable to the way-too-serious-religious leaders, those who were preoccupied with naming sinners and sins and drawing boundaries between peoples. Jesus pointed to the wide-openness of God's love as people try to get along.

What the *older* son experiences is the main point of this parable. Let's look in on the older son.

He's going about things as usual. Then, he notices something very unusual. [Luvi sings]

**Splish splash, I was taking a bath
Long about a Saturday night
A rub dub, just relaxing in the tub
Thinking everything was all right...
.....there's a party going on.....²**

The older son asks one of the servants what's going on. The servant answers with some ingenuity, “Your brother has come.” What does the older brother do? Run over to hug his sibling? No, he doesn't join in the party at all. Instead, he goes to his own Pity Party. He refuses to enter into the house. [Daniella sings]

**It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to
Cry if I want to, cry if I want to
You would cry too if it happened to you...³**

Look at the father's reaction. He's a wise and loving dad. Just as he had dropped what he was doing to run out to greet the younger son when he returned, now the father leaves the partying to go straight to the older brother who is hurting.

The older brother sees his father coming toward him and, in this parable, he speaks to his dad first. He starts out, “Listen, Dad. . .” He says he's being treated as a servant, which is ironic because the *younger* son has just said he was *willing* to be a servant, if he were just allowed back. Then, this elder son refers to his brother, not as “brother,” but as “this son of yours.” . . . (Has any parent here ever said to your spouse, “This child of yours”?)

Why is he attending his Pity Party instead of the Celebration of Life? **Because he feels unappreciated.** He has been obedient. He has stayed home and worked. Yet it seems his father never had a medium-sized party for him, let alone a big one.

How does this father respond? Jesus makes the father in this parable *just about* perfect. When challenged, the father manages *to affirm all* the family relationships at the

same time. He names his elder son *as son*, directly. He tells him that all that he has is his, which is true, for he's already given the younger son his part of the inheritance. Then the father says "this brother of yours" is back, and a celebration is necessary.

No scolding. No comparisons. Just the facts. And, an invitation to celebrate life, especially recovered life, recovered relationships. I said Jesus made the father "just about" perfect—personally I think the Dad might have been more outwardly appreciative of the older son all along... but this is a parable, a brief life-lesson, not a detailed historical account, and parables don't go into that much detail.

About a month ago, when I was walking along the University of Redlands sidewalk, heading to a session at the United Methodist Annual Conference which is held here every year, I reached a particular spot on the sidewalk and remembered an event that I'd experienced right there a couple of years ago.

I had been tired, knew that there were several more 12-hour days at the conference and that I would return, tired, on Saturday night, as I got ready for Sunday. So much to do. I remembered how I had imagined it would be easier to be a cashier, to be a road worker, to be a teacher—anything else. I was Pity Partying with great fervor! It seemed too familiar. I decided to sit down right there and consider my pity. An amusing thought occurred to me. I wondered whether I could go a month without a pity party. A week. A day. Hmmm. I wondered what good my private Pity Parties did, for me, or for John, who is my most likely invited guest. I imagined *what it would be like* not to accept the invitation to these parties that I held for myself.

I thought about the 12-Step Program advice about Pity Parties. In 12 Step programs, it is acknowledged that we *all* pity ourselves, from time to time. They insist that *we don't need to get down on ourselves for being the elder brother, for thinking we got a bum deal, for envying others—whatever*. However, the 12-step program advises us to have only a **short pity party**, then to get on with celebrating life.

One consequence of staying **too long** at our pity parties, AA points out, is that we think, "Poor me, poor me, poor me," then we *pour me* a drink.

On that day, on the sidewalk of U of R, I grasped the elder brother's experience anew. It was not just that I identified with his Pity Partying. I *also* had the blessing of interacting with the Father, who of course Jesus meant to represent God, in this parable. That's why Jesus cast such a good and wise dad for the role. I felt that day the blessing of God—no judgment, just an invitation, to celebrate life...and any recovery of life...at any time.

The invitation to enjoy, to come together...is what life is about, and what religion can cultivate in us. I have attended plenty of pity parties since that encounter with God on U of R sidewalk a couple years ago, plenty. However, every time we take that bigger perspective and feel deeply loved by God, truly appreciated, it soaks in more deeply and helps us for the next time.

Luvi was going to sing the 23rd Psalm today, but on Thursday he called me and said he found a song that fit the theme—*Ol' Man River*. I appreciated Luvi's diligence and *knew we* would be blessed to hear one of the best songs ever written for an American musical. The singer is a black man who is a deckhand on the Showboat that travels up and down the Mississippi River. The singer is reflective, isn't he? He personifies the river, calling it Ol' man river, who jes' keeps rollin' along...while he and other "colored folks" "sweat and strain, body all achin' and racked with pain..." If anyone ever deserves

to have a pity party, it's this worker. Life is unfair and hard. Life is not just. In fact, we could call this a protest song . . . one in which he feels solidarity with others. However, there is a sense of transcendence in this song, especially in the music, but also in the lyrics. The only explicit reference to religion is his reference to "Gittin' no rest till de judgment day."

Christianity certainly did and can feed into acceptance of unjust and painful systems if we think of liberation *only in afterlife*. But we have a sense that the singing itself gets this hard-worker to a deeper place.

I'm not sure that realizing others have much bigger problems than we do is particularly helpful, *even though it's always true*. My advice (from experience) is this: maintain a short list of *healthy* things we can do to help get us back into the celebration of life, if we find ourselves imitating the elder brother. What *might* help (if we cannot actually change the *cause* of the frustration at the time) is a kind of reflective *prayer that helps us take a bigger perspective, a perspective that takes in a lot of others. We can appreciate backwards to the past, in our minds and we can imagine forward, thinking of a positive future*. However, some tangible rewards may help us too, such as a *song* that we sing or listen to, getting into *nature*, a walk or *some enjoyable exercise, comfort food*, or probably what many of us do--go to a coffee shop to see a *friendly barista* (turn to Luvi and Daniella). Knowing we can turn to these *healthy* behaviors may *shorten* our pity party and help us to move to **a bigger, deeper, more courageous place**.

A recent *Sports Illustrated* magazine article, actually the one on the inside of the back cover, which usually has some touching story, did have a story that touched me. The author, Phil Taylor, found a new "favorite" team. It's the Wounded Warrior Amputee Softball Team, started by a guy named Van Sleet who had worked (for his day job) with prosthetics and severely injured veterans for 30 years. When he was not working, he was often coaching and playing softball. He decided to combine his two loves and got together a team of players all of whom ran or caught the ball with a prosthetic limb. They were surprisingly good. Teams made up of all able-bodied players (often police officers or firefighters) expected to take it easy on this Wounded Warrior team. They discovered they had to work to keep up. The players on this team have every reason to have long pity parties, yet they were surprised that *they* were so appreciated, as *they* we so glad for their opportunity to play, and to play well.⁴

Our faith tradition does not deny problems, and from all of Jesus' parables that depict conflict, it is clear that Jesus as all the other earlier prophets named and sought to face conflicts when they arise. We could each right now easily name 50 conflicts that concern us, I bet. Yet, we are called not only to do that, but also to look around at all of life and to come together as communities to celebrate this life.

I bumped into a short prayer this week that I pray on behalf of us all: "God of great joy, you have invited us to come to the party that you have planned. We would love to come. Amen."⁵

¹ "Celebration" by Kool and The Gang

² Bobby Darin, "Splish Splash"

³ Lesley Gore, "It's My Party"

⁴ "Battlefield to Ball Field," by Phil Taylor, *Sports Illustrated* July 4, 2011, p. 144

⁵ *Alive Now*, July/August 2007, 63.