Sunday June 20, 1976

"WHERE WAS THE PARTY HELD?" Luke 15:11-32

Most of us are familiar with the story just read from the Gospel of Luke. It is usually called the "parable of the prodigal son." That title, however, tends to put the emphasis in the wrong place. It is better to call this story the "parable of the waiting father." This is where the focus properly belongs for above all it describes the loving patience of God, a God who never gives up on any one of us and continually waits for us.

If we look at the story in this way, it not only tells us a lot about God, but also describes the right kind of behavior for us who are parents as we relate to our children. In addition it describes the kind of behavior we as Christians are to have to others who are lost and find themselves. Furthermore as we listen to the story of the waiting father we also discover that in our relationship to God we are often like the prodigal son. Let's begin with that.

We are often like the younger son who left home in the parable in that we too sometimes think that by leaving the father's house we can find true freedom. That's one reason the younger son left.

To live in a household, or in a community always means a certain amount of give and take. As people we do get on each other's nerves. We can't always be our own boss totally. This young man got tired of hearing his father's advice,

But the father in this case did not give advice in order to show his power, or to play tricks on his children, although we as parents may do this at times. But in the highest sense we all know that children and adults need guidance and boundaries. There is no such thing as complete freedom to do as we please whenever we want whether this be in our homes, in this city or anywhere.

Yet we want independence. We get tired of listening to advice, of hearing someone say, "don't do that, or do this." "Be home before midnight." "Drive carefully." or "I don't like the crowd you're hanging around with." And it maybe that sometimes as human parents we give too much advice, but not so with God.

To live in God's household, in God's world means there are some restrictions. But the restrictions are for our greater freedom. This is true in our life together wherever we are. For God, freedom means that each one of us should become what we ought to be. We should not, for example, become a slave of our desires, a slave to our ambition, or to our need for recognition.

So when God suggests some limitations, it is not too limit our freedom, but just the opposite--to give us greater freedom. It is love that is behind the bidding and forbidding.

But the younger son did not understand this. He still wanted to leave home. He had other plans and what the father said did not suit him. It did not fit in with the way he wanted to live. He was afraid he would miss something. He felt a tremendous urge to live life to its fullest. We know the feeling!

"Give me my inheritance," said the younger son, "then I can leave home, be on my own and experience tree freedom."

The father gave in to his son's request. He divided the inheritance between the two sons and the younger one left home. Notice that the father did not try to force the son to stay home. He let him go. God forces no one.

Now the young man was able to live in what he considered grand style. He got his own apartment. He could do what he wanted--there were no restrictions. He bought new clothes, got new friends and lived it up.

What the son forgot, however, in all of his free living, was that everything he had came from his father. But he used it all without taking that into account. And because he used all that he had without taking his father into account, life began to fall apart. He had forgotten his roots.

It happens all the time. The boy in the garage was bickering with his father. "I don't owe the world a thing," he said. "I didn't ask to be born."

It's true that nobody asks to be born, but it does not follow that we don't owe the world a thing. We have a tremendous debt to the past which we take for granted. The boy

in the garage had never taken a good look around him. Everything he enjoys is a free gift from the past. His tools, his machinery, his clothes, indeed his health itself--all were invented or developed or fortified by his ancestors.

None of us contributes more than one millionth of 1 percent to the accumulated knowledge and comfort we call civilization. The whole world is a gigantic legacy. Imagine having to start afresh each generation. Who would invent the wheel, devise the lever, construct the alphabet and the multiplication table? I could not; could you?

Everything we have comes from others and ultimately from God. But when we use it as if it were all our own, it decays in our hands. And it happens all the time. We use the world and its resources as if they belonged to us exclusively.

In the case of the younger son in the parable, the more unhappy and lost he felt, the more he celebrated and spent; the more he threw himself into the company of his friends, the more diversion he sought. He could no longer stand being alone. He got easily bored and had to be continually buying new things to amuse him.

The young man who thought he was free discovered that he was bound to his urges and appetites. He was bound to a grand style of living and could not let it go. He was prepared to lie and cheat and disregard every good resolution--that much he was a slave to his standard of living.

Now to many of his friends who saw him only from the outside, he looked free. The saw him as being lucky to be free from his past. The son himself knew differently. The world outside saw only the facade. They did not see the emptiness within. The young man heard the rattle of the invisible chains in which he walked. He was less free than he had ever been.

The situation got worse. His money ran out. Finally in desperation he had become a man living among the pigs and for the first time he began to realize what it meant to be alone and lost. He was a slave. He had less freedom than ever before.

The fact is, of course, that we are always subject to one master or another. We can be subject to God and then we are in God's community and have the higher freedom of the people of God with constant access to God. Or we can be subject to our urges and become slaves to ourselves, to our fears and worries and desires.

The younger son had wanted to be totally free and thought he could find this by cutting himself off from his father and his roots, but he found nothing but chains. So the parable is saying that we cannot separate ourselves from God in whom we live and move and have our being without some disastrous consequences. To try to cut ourselves off from our dependence on God is a ridiculous as our being disturbed over our dependence on air and then holding our breath in order to assert our freedom. Or as one man put it--"Sure, religion is a crutch, but who says you don't limp."

The young man in the parable had to hit bottom before he came to his senses. "But when he came to himself," is the phrase Jesus used to describe the son's turn around. And it wasn't just a turning away from something, but turning back home. Whenever the New Testament speaks of repentance, always the great joy is in the background. The Bible does not say, "Repent or hell will swallow you up!" but "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand."

The prodigal son, like all of us, had come to his teachable moment, and this is God's opportunity. God has been patiently waiting in the background. God doesn't panic, but constantly waits for us to come to our senses.

And so the son returned home. He said to himself, "I will say to my father, 'father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" He doesn't say--"Father, I grew more mature in the far country. I've grown up. I've suffered and atoned for my mistakes. So you must accept me and take me back."

The son was taken back not because of his greater maturity, but solely because of the miracle of God's love and acceptance.

And God's love and acceptance is such even when the father saw the son from a distance down the road, he ran to meet

the son and embraced him. God not only patiently waits for us, but when we turn around, God comes to meet us. And note too, that the father didn't stomp on his son. He didn't say, "I told you so. I knew you would be back. I hope you have learned your lesson. If you promise to be good, I'll take you back."

Instead the father gave a party to welcome his son home. And where was the party held? In the father's house. The father said to his servants, bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet and bring the fatted calf and kill it." And a big party was held.

But not everyone was happy and ready to celebrate. The older brother was jealous. He couldn't understand his father's forgiving and loving attitude toward the younger brother. He immediately began to make comparisons. Why hadn't the father given him a party? He was the one who had been faithful over the years. Why should there be so much rejoicing over a sinner who repents? It seemed unfair! We know the feeling. But at the same time, Jesus wants us to know that it is the attitude of the father that is to be commended.

The parable is not saying that the father condoned the actions of the younger son in leaving home and squandering his fortune. Rather the parable emphasizes the father's joy at his son's return, and he wants the older son to be joyful also. The prodigal received more than he dared to hope for.

So the parable over-all says that God's kingdom is amongus and that God's house is wide open always to receive us. Wherever you are, in whatever far country, you can come home. God is always patiently waiting. God is the waiting father.

Furthermore when you do return to God, a party is held. God himself gives the party. God's house is where parties are held when we return home. I want this church to be the kind of house where such parties are give--where there is happiness and singing and celebration when people come home. This is God's house too, where hungers are fed, where loneliness is loved, and where we are forgiven--where we are healed and where everyone belongs, no matter how far away we have strayed.

Hopefully there will not be among us the attitude of the older brother in the parable--the complaining that it's unfair when sinners are welcome home. God wants us to rejoice, just as he rejoices when people return to him.

Are you in a far country? Are you lost? Do you need to be loved and accepted? Welcome home! God accepts you no matter what your past, no matter what you have done. We accept you.

Today is father's day in our country. This parable tells us what kind of father God is to all of us. Hopefully it will make us better fathers too. Amen.