Sunday, March 25, 2001
THE WAITING FATHER
Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

I'm not sure Dr. Laura would agree with the father's forgiving acceptance of his wayward son in this story. The few times I've heard her on the radio while driving, when a parent asks her advice about a child's misbehavior, she emphasizes the importance of "consequences."

I can imagine the father in this parable calling her and saying, "Dr. Laura, I've got a dilemma. A few years ago, our younger son asked for his part of the family estate. I gave it to him. Then, a few days later, he left home, and we haven't heard from him since. His mother and I are worried sick. If he should contact us someday and want to come back home, what should be my response?"

In my imagination, Dr. Laura's advice might go something like this: "Tell him he can come back, but there are going to be some consequences. Tell him also that you hope his wild and wasteful days are over and that you expect him to settle down. He's going to have to work hard and be obedient like his older brother. He also needs to find some way to make it up to his mother, who has been worried sick the whole time her son has been gone and hasn't even taken the trouble to contact his parents."

But that's not the way Jesus told the story. The father had been waiting, hoping that one day his son would return. Then it happened. The father was looking out the window, and in the distance, he saw the younger son coming back. He didn't wait until the son got to the house. The father ran to meet him. He put his arms around him and kissed him. He did all of this before the young man could say a word. He didn't wait to see if the son was repentant. After the young man had a chance to make his little speech to his father, the consequences were not what anyone, including Dr. Laura, would have suggested or expected.

The father said to his servants, "Quickly, hurry, bring out a robe, the best you can find, and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat, dance, and celebrate."

The party was on. But not everyone was there. The older brother was faithfully working in the fields. He hadn't yet heard the good news. As he was returning home and got near the house, he could hear the music and the dancing. He called to one of the servants and asked what was going on. The answer: "Your brother has returned, and your father has organized a big party to celebrate his homecoming." The older brother was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pleaded with him to join the party. But he said to his dad, "All these years I have been a faithful son. I have obeyed the rules. I have never been disobedient. Yet you have never given me a party so I could invite my friends and celebrate. But when this disobedient son came back, who has wasted his inheritance and lived with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him."

This story challenges our understanding of fairness. Having been raised on the study of the Jewish law and the Hebrew prophets, this older son believed that nobody was exempt from the rules. Every human being was under the obligation to play by the book.

I'm told that first-born children have a reputation for being rather more careful rule-keepers than their younger siblings. I'm not a first-born myself, and I'm not sure this is necessarily true.

I'll have to check with our children to see if they think it's true in their situation. But it was true in this case.

Even though I'm not a first-born, I have a lot of sympathy for this older son. There might have been times when he was tempted to leave home and experiment, seeking good times in the distant city. But he hadn't yielded to temptation. He'd stayed on the farm. He'd worked for his father, followed orders, and never openly challenged parental authority, though he might have grumbled in private now and then. Since this older, careful son had always colored inside the lines, it was hard for him to understand why everybody didn't follow the rules. Having steeled himself against temptations, he had little patience for those who hadn't been as self-disciplined as he had been.

There are a lot of people like him in church congregations. Some of them may imagine that in their youth, they kept the rules more strictly than they actually did. All of us have selective memories. Still, there are many people who credit their success to having played it straight.

Lest you misunderstand, Jesus appreciated such people very much. He often confronted people with their obligations and warned them of what might happen if they ignored those obligations. But he also talked about the need for compassion for those who haven't managed to live by the rules. He spoke about extraordinary mercy for people who've messed up their lives — and probably other people's lives too. And many times, he even hung around with such people.

In fact, that's the background, the context for this series of parables about those who get lost and are found by God. If you read the two verses in Luke's gospel before Jesus told these parables, it's quite revealing. Luke wrote, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to him. And the Pharisees and Scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

In Jesus' day, where you ate, what you ate, and with whom you ate were critical matters. This was especially true among the religious Jews for whom eating together was literally a religious experience. Because of its religious implications, there were some very strict rules about what took place around the table and after a meal. Cleanliness was especially important: clean dishes, clean food, clean hands, and clean hearts. A proper Jewish meal was a kind of worship service in which believers honored God by sanctifying the most ordinary details of their lives.

In this kind of atmosphere, you can understand why Jesus offended many people with his table manners and especially his tablemates. Sometimes he didn't wash his hands properly, nor did his disciples. He seemed to eat whatever was put in front of him. His worst offense was that he thought nothing of sitting down to eat with people whose behavior was not the best. So his critics grumbled, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

In those days, sinners fell into several categories: people who did dirty things for a living, such as pig farmers and tax collectors; people who did immoral things, such as liars and adulterers; people who did not keep the religious rules up to the standards of the religious authorities, such as Samaritans and gentiles.

If Jesus were here today, who are some of the people you might find him eating with and being criticized for it? Someone with AIDS? Homosexuals? Drug addicts? An unmarried woman on welfare with three children from three different men? A woman who has had an abortion? A doctor who performed an abortion? According to the New Testament, you would find Jesus

eating with such people. Would you then complain and say: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"? Doesn’t he know the kind of message he is sending? Why doesn’t he obey the church rules? Who is going to believe he speaks for God if he does not keep better company?

It was in response to this kind of criticism that Jesus told this story of the “waiting father,” also known as the parable of the prodigal son. In one sense, the heart of the story is about eating together. The father with two sons has trouble getting his family to sit down at the same table for a meal and a party. The younger son is so affected by his sense of unworthiness that he is prepared to eat the rest of his meals in the kitchen with the hired hands. The older son is so inflated by his sense of righteousness and his father’s unfairness in welcoming his younger brother home that he will not eat with anyone who has not earned a place at the table. Both sons suffer from the illusion that they can be in relationship with their father without being in relationship with each other.

There are two elements in the parable that sometimes get neglected. One is the party. It was the music, dancing, and feasting that offended the older son. Of course, let the younger brother return home. Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of penitent sinners, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with music and dancing? Yes, let the sinner return, but to bread and water, not the fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe and ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing. What kind of family values is the father demonstrating by throwing a party for such a renegade? What kind of virtue would that encourage?

Fred Craddock, in one of his sermons on the story, changed the ending and had the father slip the ring and the robe on the elder brother and kill the fatted calf in honor of his years of faithfulness and obedience. A woman in the back of the church yelled out, “That’s the way it should have been written.”

Some years ago, when I was leading a Bible study group, we were studying this parable of the compassionate father. Everyone in the group could empathize with the elder brother who stayed home. One person in the group said, “Why be good? I agree completely with the attitude of the older son. His younger brother took off, squandered his part of the family inheritance, led a riotous life, and when he returned, he was given a lavish party. It’s almost as if he was rewarded for his bad conduct.”

Another member of the group said, “It happens all the time. Read the newspapers. Someone gets into a lot of trouble, gets caught, then writes a book about it, and becomes rich and famous. It isn’t fair. Why be good? It doesn’t pay.”

Someone else said, “That’s right. The parables of Jesus are troublesome because they contradict all the known laws of fairness. There’s that story about a farmer who hires people to work in his fields. Some start at sunrise, some at the morning coffee break, some at noon, some in the middle of the afternoon, and some an hour before quitting time. Everyone seems grateful and satisfied for their employment because they need the money to feed their families. The dissatisfaction comes at the end of the day, at pay time, when everyone is paid the same. It isn’t fair.”

Another member of the group said, “Not only is there unfairness in the parables of Jesus, but remember also that criminal on the cross next to him. That good-for-nothing barely sneaked in under the wire with his deathbed repentance, and yet he apparently gets the same reward as

someone who has lived a lifetime of goodness and piety. How would you feel if you were raised in an upright Christian family, attended church regularly, and had established an exemplary home in the community, holding down a regular job, paying your bills and taxes on time, only to find that some good-for-nothing Johnny-come-lately with a deathbed confession is welcomed into heaven with a big party?"

Why be good? It's a question heard frequently. But note the false assumptions on which the question is based. It assumes that those who aren't good have more fun and enjoy life more. Why do people assume that doing wrong or leading a useless life is more fun and fulfilling than doing good and being faithful? Why do you assume that sin is more fun than goodness? Is it really more enjoyable to lead a useless life?

Maybe the problem is our misunderstanding of goodness. It is more than obeying the rules. People who are "righteous" are those who obey the rules but go no further. They take great satisfaction in keeping the letter of the law and are inclined to be hard on those who do not. But they all too frequently do not extend themselves beyond what the law requires. They are not compassionate. They do not reach out. The righteous frequently become self-righteous. They are righteous but not good.

The priest and the Levite in the story of the good Samaritan were righteous people, but they left a wounded man to suffer in the ditch because the law did not require them to care for him. The Samaritan, on the other hand, was called "good" by Jesus because he responded out of mercy, kindness, and justice. He went beyond what was required by the rules.

Fortunately, the human race in its more enlightened moments has thought better of the good than of the righteous. Equally important, I believe good people have more fun in life than those who are only righteous. The good are being true to their basic nature as having been created in the image of God. I also find that truly good people are those who rejoice with God when a sinner repents, are glad when a party is given, and will accept an invitation to the party.

The good news is that God loves the righteous, the good, and sinners too. All are invited to the party. You probably noticed that in this story, the father also took the initiative to go out to meet and invite the older son to the party, even though the older son presumed to judge his father. In both instances, the father did not behave the way patriarchs are supposed to behave in Middle Eastern culture. In both instances, he surrendered his prerogative as the patriarch of the family. He risked stepping way outside the bounds of customary behavior for the sake of reconciliation. The father loved the son who'd flaunted him and offended common decency, and he loved the son who'd scrupulously and sometimes smugly kept the rules.

Also, consider this: just maybe, there was a bit of envy in the older brother. Maybe, deep down, he wished he had the spirit to break away a little, to kick up his heels, to take a risk.

But no matter, the important point Jesus wants to make is that the father also honors the older son who has worked faithfully, as well as the younger son. Nothing has been taken from the older brother to be given to the younger brother.

You have to ask yourself, why is it when God is forgiving and loving to someone you think doesn't deserve it, you don't like it? Life with God is not a pulley system so that when someone else goes up, you go down. God does not have a limited amount of love and forgiveness so that when God forgives someone you think is less deserving, there is less love and forgiveness for you.

So no matter whether you run away from God and then return or whether you stay with God, you are invited to the party. The important question is, will you come in and eat with people you may have heretofore despised or found it hard to forgive? Amen.