

LIKE A WATERED GARDEN

Feasting from the Garden

a prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
March 13-14, 2010 ♦ Third Sunday in Lent
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Joshua 5: 9-12

(God)said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 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 finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

"On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Joshua 5:11-12

Today, we gather on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. This particular Sunday is traditionally called Laetare Sunday, or Refreshment Sunday. Laetare means to sing or to rejoice. Thus, this particular Sunday in Lent is supposed to provide a moment of relief and joy in the midst of all our Lenten disciplines of serious reflection, spiritual renewal, and soul searching penitence. It is meant to be a rest stop on our Lenten journey...a chance to catch our breath, relax, re-energize and reconnect with the joy of God's garden.

Did you notice all of the feasting in our texts today? In Joshua, the people of Israel have finally arrived in the promised land. And on that day...“on that very day” the text says...the manna ceased and they ate the produce of the land. On that day, God said “I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” Sounds like an occasion to throw a party to me. And the people of Israel did. They feasted. They ate unleavened cakes and parched grain. It must have been quite an occasion.

You will remember that for 40 years they have been wondering the wilderness. They had been seeking the promised land, trying to find their way home. The food of their wilderness wanderings was “manna,” which literally means “what is it?” And I am sure that in some way they were grateful for this daily provision of nourishment. Better that, than starve to death! But on the other hand I am sure that they were just plain sick of the stuff. In fact, the people of Israel were known to complain to Moses: “Manna in the morning, manna in the evening. Manna. Manna. Manna. We're sick of this manna.” And I can't blame them really.

So here we are in the middle of Lent and we are reading about a day of feasting and rejoicing, when the people of Israel finally arrived home and were able to eat from the garden of their new land. Their wilderness wandering was finally ended. The days of eating manna were over. God's promise was fulfilled. They had found their way to that promised land flowing with milk and honey. And more than the promise of a land, God's ultimate promise had been fulfilled, “I will be with you” had come to pass. It was cause for celebration and feasting. It still is.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells a parable, probably one of his most famous. A prodigal son spends his inheritance recklessly and foolishly. The King James Version says he “wasted his substance with riotous living.” The prodigal son found himself in deep hunger. He was so hungry that he was desperate to eat anything. So hungry that even pig slop sounded delicious, but no one would give him anything. Finally, one day, in his deep hunger, when he hit bottom, he came to himself. He remembered that his father's hired hands had “bread enough and to spare” and so he started for home.

We know this story. The prodigal son returns home and his father goes crazy with his welcome. He puts his arms around his son and kisses him wildly. He brings out a fine robe, sandals and ring and puts it on him. He orders that the fatted calf be killed and a party be thrown. It was a day for celebration and feasting. A son who was dead is alive again! A son who was lost is found! The party was on. Let the rejoicing begin.

Here we are in the middle of Lent and we are reading about another day of feasting and celebration. The prodigal's self-imposed exile from his father's garden was over. The father was overjoyed to welcome his lost son home. It was time to party and feast from the garden.

But Jesus' parable won't leave it there. We can't forget the elder son. The elder son was out in the field when the younger brother returned home. He now comes home to find a party in progress. It was this elder son who never left the garden of home, who was responsible and hard working and obedient, who stayed to tend the garden and work the land like a slave, who never sowed his wild oats in the seedy red lights of a distant city.

Well, the elder son was not a happy camper when he learned that his father had thrown a party for his prodigal brother. And so, the elder brother refuses to enter the party. Jesus' parable reaches its climax when the father comes out to meet his eldest son and pleads with him to come to the party. But the elder son refuses and angrily tears into his father:

'Listen! 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!

To which the father doesn't argue, but simply says:

'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'

Here in the middle of Lent, we are reading stories of rejoicing and delight. But we are also hearing a story about one who refuses to rejoice. Here is a brother who has always feasted from the garden, who knows nothing but the fullness and provision of the garden, and yet now refuses to feast from it. Rather than feast from the garden of delights, he chooses to be right.

Jesus' story leaves so many questions unanswered. We don't know if the younger son came home because he was really, really sorry for what he had done, or simply because he was starving to death! We don't know if the younger son actually turned his life around, or ate his full and then skedaddled like an addict in search of another wild trip. All we know is the father, because of his great love, threw a party for his younger son. All of our questions go unanswered. Besides, I don't think they matter to this father anyway.

What we do know is that dad had to leave the party in progress to go out and meet his eldest son in the yard. Dad had to take his ridiculously enormous love out to him, the same ridiculously enormous love that he showed for the younger brother. So there, in the yard, away from the party, stood good ole dad in the only place his ridiculously enormous love would allow him to be. And Dad had to remind the older brother that his love for his younger son was not some special right or favor. There is nothing special about his love for either of his two sons. It is the same ridiculously enormous love that he gives to all his children whether one goes astray or one stays home. It is a love that welcomes both.

Did you notice that this parable, which is actually the third (and longest) of three, is offered in response to a complaint leveled at Jesus eating with "sinners!"

"Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable..."

Did you get that? The religious authorities are the ones complaining. They are the ones standing on the sidelines all uptight and anxious and fearful. They are the ones who are self-righteous and angry and judgmental. They refuse to acknowledge or accept that God's love is ridiculously enormous. They refuse to believe that God's love is a love that welcomes and throws parties for sinners (however we define them)! Pat de Jong says that

"Jesus told this story so that those who thought they possessed the answers – those dutiful, law-abiding, religiously devout do-gooders—would know how radically different life would be if they opened themselves to the divine richness of radical grace. Jesus told this story as a response to religious leaders who were complaining that he received tax collectors and prostitutes and that he even ate with them. Seen in this light then, the target of the parable moves our focus from wayward sinners in need of forgiveness to self-righteous saints who begrudge God's mercy and grace for others."

To say it more bluntly, Ernest Campbell said: "The biggest problem with American Christianity is that we have a Loving Father Gospel in an Elder Brother Church!"

My friends, if we accept that the ridiculously enormous love of the father in Jesus' parable is indeed the very Love of God, then we've got our work cut out for us. For alternative, progressive Christian communities like ours, the daunting task before us is to try and help move ourselves and the wider Christian community from the position of judgment to grace...from fear of God and neighbor to a Love that welcomes and includes... and throws a party for prodigals and perfectionists, alike.

If we are ever going to reclaim Christianity and make it relevant once again, we're going to have to be transformed and renewed in this ridiculously enormous love of God and let God's ridiculously enormous love begin to do its good work in us and through us. And we aren't going to "get" this kind of love or be transformed or moved by it unless we enter the party and start to dance.

I love how Jesus refused to tell the ending of this parable. Did the loving father convince his elder son to step into the party? What was the elder brother's response? I don't know. But I think this question is really our question! There is a party going on, a party energized by God's ridiculously enormous love. What will our response to that Love be? Will we step into the party and dance? How will we respond to such love? Will we feast from God's garden of promise as the Israelites did when they arrived at home...will feast from the garden of God's great love? Again, I don't know. But this is our story to finish!

Amen.