

**Fundamentals of Family:
“Celebration”
Luke 15:11-24**

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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When our Lord wanted to drive home a truth, he told a story. There were 99 sheep safe in the fold, but the good shepherd went searching for the one that was lost. A woman had 10 precious coins. She lost one of them. A certain man had two sons. The Bible never gets better than here in Luke 15. The thread that binds these stories together is the single word celebration. (Luke 15: 23-24) *“Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.”* Come to the party.

LET US CELEBRATE LIFE

Forrest Gump says life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get. Some people say life is like a roller coaster ride. It picks you up, slams you down, jerks you around, and brings you back to where you started. My father-in-law liked to sing, “Life is like a mountain railroad, with an engineer that’s brave; we must make the run successful from the cradle to the grave.” I like to say, life is like an ice cream cone, the moment you think you have it licked, it drips on you.

Fundamentally, Life is a GIFT, a pure simple gift. We didn’t earn it, we didn’t engineer it, we don’t even have a lot of choices about the way it ends. What we have is a present moment, a shining sliver of time in which to live and move and have our being. That’s why I like birthdays. They celebrate our being more than our doing. Happy Birthday! We rejoice that you are alive. Birthdays are not about being talented musicians, astute business women, or remarkable athletes. Birthdays are about you being you. We celebrate the gifts of joy, peace, love, perseverance, kindness, and gentleness that you bring to us.

A key to life is keeping this wonder alive until we die. Mother Theresa once visited a nursing home in the United States. She came away confused. They have good homes, good food, good televisions, good everything, but I failed to find a single person with a smile on their face. I am used to seeing smiles on our people, even the dying ones smile. Is life for you a burden or a blessing?

Life is a TRUST; gifts received are trusts to be invested. Herein lies the tragic mistake of the prodigal son. He thought life was an entitlement to be seized, taken, and demanded. *“And the younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me, my share of the estate.’”* Never mind that such action meant the total surrender of the father’s social security and certainly a route to an early grave. Those who understand Middle Eastern Culture suggest the boy in essence said, “Drop dead,

old man, I want my inheritance now,” hardly, an attitude of gratitude for the gift of life. So, it comes as no surprise that he squanders his wealth in wild living and loses everything he has. Greed leads to need. *“And he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.”*

In every generation, almost in every family, there are prodigals among us. It’s hard to do business with greedy people. It’s damaging to families to have greedy siblings. It’s harmful to communities when people are content to consume the corn, eat the fish and leave behind a dirty dish.

Did you see in the paper on Thursday, how emergency room doctor turned environmental evangelist, Matthew Sleeth, has estimated we can cut energy use by 14% if we only kept the Sabbath day holy? Take one day a week to stop driving, shopping, working and actually rest. It might not only save the environment. It might save us! Life is a trust. Invest it wisely.

CELEBRATE HOMECOMINGS

You Can Go Home Again. *“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘I will arise and go back to my father’”* (Luke 15:17).

Thomas Wolfe in his famous 1940’s novel says you can’t go home again. “You can’t go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to a young man’s dream of glory and fame, back home to the old forms and systems which are changing all the time.” Of course, he is right.

I can’t go back to playing marbles on the playground of my grade school. The school is no longer there. I can’t go back to playing saxophone in my high school band. I gave my horn away. Given my current state of health, I am probably never going to play another round of golf. The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on.

There is another sense in which Wolf is all wrong. If by going home I mean a return to the essence of who I am, if by going home I find my true identity and my spiritual self, then I dare not go on until I go back. I can go home again.

Here’s the truth about our lives. We came from God. We belong to God, and no matter how far away we roam, how high we climb, nor how low we stoop, God is waiting with open arms to welcome us back.

Jesus strains the language to express the joy of an extravagant, loving, lavishing father when one of his own comes home. *“Bring out the best robe and put it on his back. Get the signet ring; put it on his finger. Put some shoes on his feet, all God’s children need shoes. Kill the fatted calf; let us eat and celebrate, for my son was dead but now is alive, was lost but now is found. So they began to celebrate.”*

Note further that angry brothers cannot spoil the party. *“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found”* (Luke 15: 32). Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he heard about the party, he was angry, upset, put out. Not even the humble pleas of a merciful father can persuade him to join the party. He stays in the fields, pouting, rationalizing, and hurting.

I don't mean to be pessimistic, but almost every family I know has a brother, sister, mother, father, son or daughter, who refuses to join the party. They are not about to participate in the celebration. They will not let their hearts be touched by grace. So they sit outside, pouting, judging, and complaining. *“Never once have I had a young goat to celebrate with my friends.”*

When life is constructed on competition, rivalry, jealousy, and comparisons, there's not much room for celebration. When the blessing of one gets pitted against the unbledness of another, the family is in trouble. So what can we do? We can go out and invite, as the father does. We can remind the person of the truth. *“All that I have I yours.”* We can continue the party.

Never let a hurt, pessimistic, stubborn family member destroy the celebration. They don't deserve that power. The party must go on. The joy needs to be shared. Let the celebration continue.

Homecomings here are dress rehearsals for a Homecoming over there. One of these days, we are going to make it to a place where tears are wiped away and disease will reign no more. One of these days, our sins and sorrows will be put behind us and our temptations to roam will be no more. One of these days, justice will prevail, hunger will end, the wicked will be separated into eternal punishment. One of these days, we will find ourselves finally home, home to a God who made us, home to a Christ who saved us, home to the Holy Spirit who will empower us to live like we ought to live.

So the Bible says, *“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”* I love to see heaven in an uproar. What a day of rejoicing that will be.

Let the party begin. Let it never end! Join the Celebration!