

Text: Luke 15: 11-32
Title: Fat Calves and New Teeth
Date: 10.08.17
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When Carerra saw me she hollered, “Come on over and sit down. I’ve got a testimony for you.”

She gave me a little kiss on the cheek. She smelled like stale cigarettes and sweet perfume. With her hair done up, her face made up, and her countenance lifted up, she looked up with a big toothless grin, grabbed hold of my hand and began to testify. She said, “I’ve been praying for years for my husband. I’ve been driving these people to their last nerve always praying for my husband.”

A shadow of confusion crossed over my face. I’d known Carerra for years and I’d never known her to be married. She was a drug-addict-hooker. She lived on the fringes of streets, shelters, and self. Years ago, she surfaced at Roseland Christian Ministries.

She lived in the shelter for women.

She helped fix meals for the homeless men.

She moved into a house that the Center owned.

She worked at the Center.

She was often the only woman in the circle of men at Morning Prayers.

She was colorful, charismatic, and always made me smile.

She said, “Twenty years ago I got married. He was a good man; always brought his check home and didn’t mess around. But, I started hanging out on the streets and got hooked on drugs. I left him and lost him. Pretty soon I didn’t even know where he was. That was seventeen years ago. But, we never got divorced; we’ve always been married. I just didn’t know where he was.”

The shadow on my face folded into a chuckle.
I never dreamed she was married.

She said, “But I been praying that I would find my sweet little husband. And then one day last week he came in the front door of the Center while I was walking out the back. Somebody told him I was in the alley. I was having a smoke, had my hat pulled down low, and he walked up and asked my name. Sweet Jesus! Seventeen years later my husband was standing right in front of me!”

Dear friends, take a deep breath and enjoy that moment.

Carerra continued, “God has been so good to me! You just don’t know. We are going to have a recommitment service. I asked Rev. Tony if he would give us some counseling because seventeen years is a big gap. He took me back before, but seventeen years – whew! I just thank God. I am so blessed.”

The chuckle on my face opened into astonishment. You don't think of addicts who spend years getting in and out of cars on South Michigan Avenue living happily ever after. You don't think of a marriage sustaining seventeen years of separation. And yet there sat Carerra with eyes bright, spirit buoyant, and smiling like it was Easter – with only two raggedy bent teeth left in her mouth.

She said, “He gets a disability check and Veteran's Benefits and we're looking for a house. He told me they have dentists out at the VA and I could get some teeth made. The street tore up my mouth, but I like to talk and I have a lot to say, and it would be nice to get new teeth. God is good! I can't thank him enough for what he's done for me!”

Grab a new dress! Put on your dancing shoes!
Kill the fatted calf and meet me at the Why Not Lounge!
The prodigal wife has been found!
The prodigal wife has come home!
Let the party begin!

Now. In this world, fairy tales and love stories include bumps and bruises that don't mend or heal easily. The journey home is hard but the day after homecoming is just as hard. And yet, at that moment history gave way to hope and in Carerra's heart forgiveness and love triumphed. Something that was dead was now alive. Thanks be to God!

There is no word in the “Parable of the Prodigal Sons” about what happened after the party. The parable ends in the front yard with the father arguing with the older son. We don't know if he went into the party, or if he pouted on the porch. We don't know if the younger son lived a life of gratitude and testimony, or if he got back on his feet and took off again. We don't know about the day after the homecoming.

What we know is that when the younger son was walking back humiliated, hungry, and homesick, his father ran toward him, threw his arms around him, and threw a party.

Too often the parable is read about the boys. There's the wayward son who spent his inheritance on fast cars, fast women, and ended up eating out of the bin behind the homeless shelter. There's the stiff-play-by-the-rules-sour-puss-brother who was angry because the score wasn't being kept. But, the parable is not necessarily about the character or comparison of the brothers.

What if the parable is about the Father?
What if the parable is about the party?
What if we framed it this way?

The son comes to the father and asks for what he would get if his father were dead. Then he takes the money and runs, leaving his dad for dead. Only, he squanders his life. He blows it all and ends up a shell, a homeless shadow on the fringes. Until one day he comes to his senses and realizes that whatever life he had is over. He's a dead man walking in a dead land.

So, he hatches a plan. I am not suggesting that he wasn't sorry. I am not suggesting that he wasn't repentant. But, he schemes a reconstruction of the relationship. He may be dead as a son, but his father might be kind enough to take him back as a servant.

So.... if he's sorry,
if he's good,
if the books are still being kept,
maybe he could negotiate a better situation than life on the street.
And with that he turns for home.

His father sees him: teeth missing, hair nappy, stinking like a pig, but coming up the road and....

before the boy can breathe a word,
before he can voice his plan,
before he can even say he's sorry...
His father hoists up his robe and runs like a little school girl toward him.

Without shame or hesitation,
without weighing the balance or checking the books,
without waiting for a confession,
the father gathers the son in his arms and bridges the gap with love and forgiveness. Let the party begin.

Robert Farrar Capon puts it this way:

The boy never gets his confession out until after the kiss, until after the embrace. Confession is not a pre-condition to forgiveness. It is something that you do after you know that you are forgiven. Confession is not something you do in order to get forgiveness. It is something you do in order to celebrate the forgiveness you got for nothing. Nobody can earn forgiveness...

Dear friends, this isn't a cheeky comeback story about the boy who gathered up the courage to go home. This is a story of forgiveness undeserved. This isn't a story about someone finally getting it right. This is a story of finding a lost sheep, a lost coin, a dead son. This isn't a repentance story, this is a resurrection story!

Who knows how far down the road the father ran to kiss the son....

The dead father is alive!
The dead son is alive!

Paul puts it this way:

...because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

The father has his son back.
The hooker has a husband.

The dead are alive.
Thanks be to God!

Of course, the other brother still thinks his life counts for something. He still believes that deserve has something to do with it. He is still convinced that somebody is keeping track. And, he wants nothing to do with a party that includes his brother. He thinks his father shames the family by welcoming such a sinner.

The story ends there.

With the father on the porch pleading with his son to come in for a glass of wine and a piece of bread....

And, therein lies the scandal of the gospel!

Before we even knew we were dead – God made us alive in Christ.

Before we got the words out of our mouths – God made us alive in Christ.

Before we started to keep track – God made us alive in Christ.

Before we spoke a word of confession ~ God made us alive in Christ.

The only thing needed to get into the party is being dead.

Our only hope is resurrection.

We can wait on the porch with the brother until we die.

Or, we can acknowledge our death and come on into the party.

It's big and messy and loud but there is room enough for everyone.

So, whoever you are...

Addict/alcoholic or "good Christian" kid,
whether you are lost in keeping track or you just lost track,
whatever teeth you're missing....

There's music playing.

The party's started.

The father's dancing with his child.

The bride's dancing with her husband.

Come to the table, there's bread and wine for everyone.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.