

“Born to Party”

Do you miss the Olympics a little bit? I do. I really got into the men’s hockey this year. It’s a sport I played—very badly—in college, so I like to watch it being played well. This time around it was particularly amazing. But something about it struck me as really strange.

In the US-Canada final, all the players from both teams also play in the National Hockey League. So some of them went from being bitter rivals in the NHL to being teammates in the Olympics, and then back to being rivals. And some of them made all those transitions in reverse: teammates in the NHL, they were ferocious opponents in the Olympics, then teammates again the moment the torch went out. OK, not so unusual: this is what they do; they’re used to changing teams. That’s not the strange part.

The strange part was what I noticed happening in me. Normally, one of my favorite players is Jonathan Toews, who is the young captain of the Chicago Blackhawks. He also played at the University of North Dakota, where our son Paul went to school, so I’ve been aware of Toews for a long time: a very gifted player. He scored the first goal for Canada *against* the US in the final game, and I found myself hating the guy. The goal that tied the game for the US with twenty-four seconds left was scored by Zach Parise, son of J.P. Parise, General Manager of the Des Moines Buccaneers, who was born in Smooth Rock Falls, Ontario. But Zach was born in the US. And like Toews, the Canadian, Zach Parise also played college hockey at North Dakota. Confused? I am. And the winning goal for Canada was scored by Sidney Crosby, who plays for the Pittsburgh Penguins. I’m from Pittsburgh. I should be happy, right?

My passions about all this were so intense... and so fleeting! Why such an emotional investment? It’s almost as though we have a need to separate ourselves from others, to make distinctions so that we know who we really are: my country, my state, my city, my college, my neighborhood, my school, my clan, my church. Who are we? We’re the ones who are different from them! The cheap and easy way to unite people is through differences, even if to make it work they have to wear different colored uniforms.

But what really unites us is much simpler and far more profound. And one way to say that is that we're all born to party.

Chapter 15 of the Gospel According to Luke contains three parables of the lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost—or prodigal—son. Jesus addresses these stories to some Pharisees and scribes who are complaining that Jesus keeps company with sinners—people the Pharisees and scribes want to think of as very different from themselves. The “righteous” want to underscore those differences; Jesus keeps acting as though differences either don't exist, or don't matter very much.

In response to the complaining, Jesus tells three stories of rejoicing when something lost is found. A shepherd finds his lost sheep: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” A woman finds her lost coin: “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” And then there's this story of a very unusual family...

A man has two sons and the younger says what amounts to, “Dad, I'm tired of waiting around for you to die. Why don't you give me my inheritance now? Let's both pretend you're dead.” That's shocking. But equally shocking is that the Dad goes along. “OK, son, here you go.” Is the younger son bored and restless? Is he sick of trying to live up to his “perfect” older brother? Is the father spineless or does he let his son go because love requires freedom? We have psychologized this story to death... take your pick... none of that really matters.

The younger son takes his inheritance in cash, puts some distance between himself and home and burns through the money. Usually we like to think of him in Las Vegas (and his brother will accuse him of lurid living) but the story doesn't say so. “Dissolute” is the odd adjective here. Maybe he ran into Bernie Madoff. One way or another, the nest egg is gone, the economy turns south and a “severe famine” sweeps over the land. He gets a job feeding pigs. So the nice Jewish boy is caring for unclean animals and they are eating better than he is. Could it get any worse?

He is so hungry he elects to eat his pride. He has no legal claim on his father, but perhaps he can go back home and get a job there; Dad always treated the servants well. So he rehearses this speech, trying it out first on the pigs: “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.”

Does he mean it? Is he truly sorry, or is he just desperate? What does he really expect his father to do?

Probably not what he does. His father sees him from a distance and in a totally undignified display of delight sets out across the field toward him: robes flying, arms waving. There is not an ounce of tough love here: Where have you been? What have you been doing? Where is the money? Are you truly, truly sorry? Have you learned your lesson? You will pay me back... with interest! None of that: the father hugs his son and kisses him with unbridled joy. He cuts him off before he can finish his carefully crafted offer to shine Dad's limo for minimum wage. He calls for the servants and rolls out the red carpet: robe and sandals and ring; wake the chef and kill the fatted calf; strike up the band and party! Why? "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" Notice the language: "this son of mine"!

So far the story is much like the stories about the sheep and coin. But wait! There's more! And here is where things get sticky.

The elder brother has been working away dutifully in the fields. This heir apparent apparently hasn't even been rewarded with a management position yet. Hot and tired and sweaty, he is heading back to the house when from a distance he can hear the DJ and the shouting crowd. He asks one of the servants what's going on. Notice the hopeful language in the response: "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." It's the language of relationship: "your brother... your father."

But the elder son will have none of it. He is furious and he refuses to join the party or even to greet his lost and found brother. His father comes out to plead with him and he upbraids his father... outrageous in this culture! So in different ways and for different reasons, both of the sons have dissed their Dad.

"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you..." Isn't that interesting: the very terms on which his brother had given himself permission to come home! If the elder son got out more he might realize how well off he is. But he's angry, and anger is delicious, especially righteous anger, and he's on a roll: "... yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends." Steak for this creep and not even pizza for me! Now watch the language again: "But when *this son of yours*" who obviously is no brother of mine, "who has devoured your

property [the Greek is your *bios*, your life] with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”

These accusations of immorality always make me wonder: is this what the elder son would like to have been doing? Is it only his sense of duty that restrained him from a life of drugs, sex and rock and roll? Does he think that virtue cannot be its own reward, that this is how we all would like to behave if only we thought we could get away with it? Is he the first Puritan, whom H. L. Mencken characterized as “desperately afraid that somebody, somewhere might be having a good time”? Here is further irresistible and pointless psychologizing!

Whatever the case, the father is clear that he has *two* sons. “Son,” he begins, “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.”

And that’s the way it ends.

So... what do you think? Will the elder brother also swallow his pride and join the party? That’s not how it works out in the gospel story. Those who think themselves righteous would rather kill Jesus than embrace all the outsiders he brings along with him. And Jesus would rather die than abandon them. But the love Jesus embodies will not die, and it keeps calling to us to come to our senses, to come to the party, to draw closer to one another. This is challenging.

Divisions are a major theme for Luke: people on different sides of a great divide. And it always seems to be the case that each holds the key to the other’s wholeness, the other’s salvation. These two brothers cannot be whole apart from one another. The rich man and Lazarus, separated by wealth and class, need one another. (16:19-31) Zacchaeus the wealthy tax collector cannot be saved without being reconciled to those from whom he extorts his money. (19:1-10) The Pharisee who in the Temple thanks God he is not like the nearby tax collector separates himself from God when he looks down on the one who is different. (18:9-14)

To come to God we must come together. The party won’t be complete until these brothers find one another.

The younger sons and daughters of the world are separated from God mostly by their own sense of unworthiness. Until they come to themselves they cannot discover that the emptiness inside is a yearning for the holy, not for things or power or pleasure. Maybe they will start back home after they

have bottomed out, maybe more from desperation than from repentance, whatever. There's always a lot of bargaining at the bottom.

For the elder sons and daughters, the problem is needing somebody to look down on in order to feel like somebody. They are feeding on the empty satisfaction of being "the good one," one of Mark Twain's "good people in the worst sense of the word." Taut and tense and self-righteous and angry, they tell themselves that they have it all under control... because really, when you come down to it, God *owes* them... owes them big time. They have kept the rules, played the game, dotted the i's and crossed the t's, all the while aware of many others who were making no such effort.

These are two sides of the same graceless coin: God can't love me because I'm such a creep; God has to love me because I keep the rules. Neither one connects with the wild, irrational, boundless love Jesus portrays in the story. One can't imagine it; the other won't acknowledge the need for it. Neither one makes it to the party.

For all of us, the key to finding the love of God lies in the people from whom we are most eager to separate ourselves, the ones of whom we are most tempted to say, "Thank you, God, that I am not like these others..." Thank you, God, that I am not like my uptight brother... thank you, God, that I am not like my loose-living brother. Thank you God that I am not like all the people who seem to be so pleased not to be like me: the fundamentalists, the legalists, the literalists, the fanatics... or the atheists, the communists, the social justice Christians. Thank you, God, that my jersey is a different color from theirs.

But what this story demands that we face is the assertion that we are all born to party because God doesn't rejoice until the lost has been found, the wayward has come home and the self-righteous of every description have come to realize that the same crazy, wild love is the foundation of who we are.

In the words of the Apostle Paul, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." In the words of the Firesign Theatre, "We're all bozos on this bus."¹ Come to the party, everybody. Come to the party.

Amen

¹ *I Think We're All Bozos on this Bus*. The Firesign Theatre, Columbia Records, 1971.