

Suitable Fatherhood  
Psalm 103.1-18; Luke 15.11-32  
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Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford  
A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church  
June 20, 2010  
Fathers' Day

It has been named the most heartbreaking call in baseball history. Here's what happened: Jim Joyce is a major league baseball umpire, never to be confused with the Irish author James Joyce – of Ulysses fame -- at least not since June 2<sup>nd</sup>, two weeks ago, when Jim Joyce, the umpire, called Jason McDonald safe at first base, when he really was out.

It so happened that Jason McDonald of the Cleveland Indians was the 27<sup>th</sup> batter who faced the Detroit Tigers pitcher, Armando Galaraga, in a most memorable game. It would have been the last out of the game in which Galaraga had gotten all the previous 26 Cleveland Indian batters out.

The 27<sup>th</sup> out would have made it the 21<sup>st</sup> perfect game throughout all of the history—in the time since they were keeping the history -- of major league baseball. So, Jason McDonald hits a ground ball to Detroit first baseman, Miguel Cabrera. Cabrera throws to Galaraga who was covering first base. Galaraga catches the ball in his glove with his right foot on the bag for what should have been the 27<sup>th</sup> out of the 21<sup>st</sup> perfect game in baseball history.

But Jim Joyce calls the runner safe! (You gotta be kidding!) Meanwhile, the video tape shows that Jason McDonald clearly stepped on first base after Galaraga made the catch and touch. But Jim Joyce did not see it. That is, he didn't see it until after the game. Joyce quickly left the field, with everybody screaming at him – except Galaraga, who just smiled in disbelief (that's another sermon).

Immediately after the game, below the stands in the umpire's office, Jim Joyce asked to see the video tape. He could see right away that he was wrong – he didn't even wait to see the tape a second time. Emotional and distraught, he told the reporters who swarmed around him that he had just blown the biggest call of his life (23 year career as an up). And then, with tears on his face he made his way to the Detroit Tigers locker room. He said: "I took something away from him and if I could, I would give it back in a minute." Jim Joyce found Armando Galaraga and said to him: "Lo siento." "I am so sorry." "You were perfect. I was not." He cried. They hugged.<sup>1</sup>

Jim Joyce's response upon realizing his failings was amazingly prompt and swift. It really is a special story of confession and reckoning. It's a great story—not so much because of the mistake that was made but because of the grace and humility [of both men] that followed.

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<sup>1</sup> "A Different Kind of Perfect," Melissa Segura, Sports Illustrated, June 14, 2010.

Meanwhile in the familiar story before us this Lord's Day the prodigal son is hardly prompt and swift in his reckoning. He takes more than his good time, after he takes what he demands from his father of the family inheritance. Out on his own, left to his own devices and vices, he squandered it all – the Bible reads – in “dissolute living.” He's been living a wild life. He is woefully lost. He eventually comes to grips with his wayward ways and miscues.

Jesus tells this story, this parable, describing what God's love is like, in a sequence of things lost – as we see in Luke's 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, in the verses just prior: Jesus tells of lost sheep; and the shepherd who goes after the only one of 99 in the flock who's missing; and the lost coin, where the woman scours the entire house to find it; and then the lost son, the prodigal.

“Prodigal” means reckless, wasteful, extravagantly so. The son who takes off certainly is that. It does take a while for him to recognize the consequences of behavior . . .

The passage reads, in verse 17: “But when he came to himself.” (William Sloane Coffin speaks of that phrase as “the greatest compliment paid to sinning humanity”<sup>2</sup>) The son realized what he had done, and what he had become.

There is depth to the story. Charles Dickens is said to have called it the “finest short story ever written.” With each of its characters, there are layers and features: There's the classic focus on the wasteful, reckless, prodigal son. And then, there is the older brother – working hard, deserving, devoted to home; he complains to his father about being left out; the Bible we're using today accordingly calls this the parable of the Prodigal and the Older Brother. But then – on this father's day – there is the father.

You might say that his love is an obligation, coming with the territory . . . In the conversations among some father's here at LAC, one of our dads talked about the love he feels for his children – love that is accepting and embracing, “no matter what” without qualifications, although as a dad, he confessed his pointed opinions and particular prescriptive directions – to which other fathers have said “Amen.”

But that welcoming, accepting, love is at the heart of this father in the story; it's a picture of God's love.

And more than that -- more than the accepting love which comes with the territory – there is the celebration: the elation upon the son's return. In that connection, the parable has also been called the Joy of the Prodigal's Father.

It's not just the homecoming, the welcoming home – which when the prodigal “came to himself,” he knew that at least he could go back to where it was formerly OK, because even the hired hands working for his dad had it far better than the dire depth of the situation in which he found himself.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, Jr.:* *The Riverside Years*, vol. 2. p.249.

But more than just the welcoming – more than just the “it’s so good to see you”, it’s the celebration – the joy of beholding this child, the joy for this one once lost now found. As Jesus tells the story, the father sees the son at a distance and was filled with compassion. The father runs to embrace him. The son falls into his arms confessing, “I am so sorry dad.” The child, the son is welcomed home. But there is more . . . there is a party, a celebration. Joy rings out. . . . Amid all that has is said about the food and the eating, the father announces: Get the best robe: The finest suit! Bring on the excellent attire! “For this is my son, who was once dead, but is now alive. Once lost, but now found.”

There is both welcoming and celebration in the Father’s love: Compassion and joy.

It’s not just about the prodigal and the older brother – in either of them, we can see something of ourselves, being welcomed. But it is also about the one who does the welcoming.

Even as these two disparate brothers show us what the love of God is like – a love that embraces us “not because of” but in spite of who we are and what we’ve done” – so they also show us how we are called to be as givers and receivers of welcome, of God’s love.

. . . the prodigals, the lost and wayward, come to us. As Jesus says. . . “I was a stranger and you welcomed me in. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I lost my home in the hurricane and you helped me rebuild. I could not afford both my medication and rent and you helped me with meals at HOPE kitchen. I was a day laborer and you treated me with dignity. I was a teenager on the run, and lost, or an older person, alone, and you greeted me with open arms. Blessed are you who do such things – and do so not out obligation, but in celebration – until the homecoming of a prodigal world. Amen.