

“The Partying Father” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Cromwell and Districts Presbyterian Church, New Zealand on Sunday 6 March 2016, Lent Four. The sermon is based on Luke 15:1-3, 11- 32.

The father is determined to party. The father is determined to party with a son who thinks of himself too bad to party and a son who thinks he is too good to party.

Too bad ... too good.

Too much a sinner ... too righteous a man.

One who had made too many mistakes ... one who imagined he made no mistakes.

One who went far away ... one who remained close.

One who wasted ... one who worked.

One who squandered ungratefully ... one prudent and careful.

One who had no sense of propriety ... one who was proper and dignified.

One tattooed and pierced from head to foot ... No ... it didn't say that ... but you get the drift.

In the midst of these, a father so determined to party he runs.

A grown, dignified, respectable man, running with his gown flapping and flowing ...

Disregarding dignity, ignoring the tutt-tutting, putting aside the judging looks, he runs.

The son wasted his inheritance, his time, his talent.

Now the father spends his love in wasteful extravagance, undermining his reputation, his standing in the community, his authority as patriarch, landowner and overseer.

This running, this hugging, this kissing, cost the father his honour, his greatness in other's eyes, and that is the price he is willing to pay.

He does not wait for the son to do anything to deserve it.

He does not wait for the son to speak.

He does not wait for the son to confess.

He puts his arm around him and gives him the kiss of peace.

So determined to party

He runs, outlandishly, foolishly, recklessly towards to the son.

He does it still.

The father, God, the God we know in Jesus Christ, the God we know in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, puts aside his dignity and runs towards us, and throws a party.

He's going to throw the party anyway, whether we accept or not.

The party happens whether we are there or not, but he wants us there, and he isn't going to let our sinning or our self-righteousness get in the way.

To the younger son or daughter he says we eat and celebrate because you were dead and now you are alive again, you were lost and are not found.

And to the older brother or sister he says ... you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. We had to celebrate and rejoice.

It's called grace, God's overflowing, reckless, embracing love.

This melts hearts. This cures stiff necks. This reconciles warring factions. This warms cold rooms.

Karen Blixen wrote a book that became a movie – Babette's feast.

A town in 19th century Denmark. Muddy streets, thatched roof hovels, dour conditions. A grim setting where a white-bearded minister led a confined, frugal, limited community.

The temptations of the world were resisted. All wore black. Their diet was boiled cod and a kind of porridge, a gruel.

The minister had two daughters Philippa and Martine. Philippa with a magnificent voice. When she sang of the world to come, people were transported.

The old man died and the two daughters carried on his ministry but it was hard work – conflict, division, gossip and people drifted away leaving a faithful few.

One night, a woman sent by an old acquaintance, knocked on the sister's door and collapsed on the back step.

Her name was Babette. Her husband and son had died during the French civil war.

Her life in danger she fled to Denmark. The sisters had no money and not much room but she pleaded so they brought her in.

For years she cooked for them and became their housekeeper.

After 12 years she received a letter telling her a friend each year had renewed her ticket in the lottery and her ticket had won ... 10k francs.

The win coincided with the 100th anniversary of the old father's birth. Babette offered to cook a real French dinner for the 100th.

The town saw one amazing sight after another arrive in the kitchen – champagne, all kinds of meat, fresh vegetables, truffles.

The day came, December 15th.

And a special guest, a general from the royal palace, turned up.

The locals were warned to be careful. We will not be rude to Babette but we don't want to enjoy ourselves too much.

So they sat down, the locals glum and strict, cautious and silent, nervous of each other, not wanting to enjoy too much.

The general raised the first glass and was amazed at its taste.

And the food, it was delicious.

Gradually the banquet worked its magic.

Their blood warmed. Their tongues loosened. They talked about the good times. Enemies were reconciled. And the general made a speech - "Mercy and truth have met one another. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another."

Reconciled and freed and loosened, the little company of locals spilled out into the town, now beautiful with a fresh fall of snow.

They joined hands around the fountain and sang, until they had to go home, with joy.

Babette sat among the unwashed dishes, greasy pots, empty bottles and one of the sisters thank her. The sister was overcome when Babette said she had spent her entire 10K on the meal.

This is what the General said at the dinner ...

"We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. ... in our foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened and we see and realise that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude."

Babette is like Christ who shows our God is a party God.

We have a table in the middle of our churches, a communion table, a dinner table, a party table, to remind us, we who wasted our inheritance and we who preserved our inheritance.

It is supremely, God's yes to us.

Ever before we hear any other word from God, God says yes to us.

That is what won me to Christ as a university student.

I came into a community of faith that accepted me just as I was.

I did not need to be a certain kind of person.

I did not need to behave in a certain kind of way.

I did not need to believe a certain range of truths.

My first experience of the church was one of total acceptance, just as I was.

And it melted my heart, and I decided I wanted to give myself to such acceptance, to the one who spoke yes to me at the beginning, to the one who drew people in regardless of who they were.

As a young lawyer, I saw people who had never experienced such grace.

I acted for people who only knew judgement and condemnation and exclusion.

I saw a society that pushed people away when they wandered away.

I wanted people to experience the yes I had experienced.

I wanted people to know the God who ran towards them.

So I stand before you, today, with my collar back to front.

And I point us all to this table, this table of absolute acceptance, of abundant grace, of total forgiveness.

And I invite us together to receive from our God the means of grace, the bread and wine that draw people in to know God's love, deep in their being, right through their hearts.

We cannot keep it to ourselves. The running God runs right through our church and through into our town and community.

So after a period of silence, we are going to join that partying God, as we pray for others, that people may know acceptance, and peace, and reconciliation, embodied in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> A phrase borrowed from Barbara Brown Taylor