

Denice K. Leslie
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Lent 4 Year C
Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

**Wilderness Wanderings:
A Sermon in the First Person—“My
Father’s Son”**

The stars are out! How beautiful they are. The garden is fragrant. I can hear crickets and cicadas making their music in the stillness. Everyone else is asleep—some right where they fell after all the partying.

And here I am. I am home! Home... I still can't believe it. I never thought I would ever, in my wildest dreams be glad to be home.

As long as I can remember all I ever wanted was to get away from here! The world was full of adventure and wonder—and more importantly—freedom. Freedom to do whatever I wanted without anyone telling what I must do, should do, ought to do. Or how I should be like my dutiful older brother. Everyone for miles around admired my older brother and let me know it.

I am not my brother. How often did I say it when we were young! How often did I think it as I grew older. That conviction is all that defined my life from the time I was about 9 years of age on—and drove me to get away.

I truly believed my destiny lay beyond the walls of this house—that there I would come into my own and, in an ironic way, I ultimately did!

Which is why I stand here in my father's household once more. Although I never imagined the reception I received. That I would be wearing my father's best robe or have a ring on my finger or real shoes on my feet again.

It all began about three years ago. My brother was to be married and I knew with his new status he would become even more unbearable.

How often did I tell him, “You are not my father!” Not that either of us had much respect for our father. My brother only had eyes hungry for the opportunity to run this place as he wished. With his marriage our father was more than happy to let him do just that.

I suspected our father would be pretty much shunted aside for all intents and purposes. Not that I was concerned for him, I was concerned about what that would mean for ME.

Unlike my brother, I didn't make any pretense about how I felt about the old man. He knew I considered him to be irrelevant to my life from the get go

. It never occurred to me that my father knew exactly what he was doing and that everything he did was by his considered choice.

How much I underestimated him. So unlike other fathers. He never made us kiss his ring or kneel before him. He never held himself aloof—and he never, ever in my memory exercised his right to verbally or physically punish any one—not even one of his hired hands.

He never used fear or intimidation as a tool to win respect. No he had a different way—a way I discounted and misunderstood until I came to myself. At any rate, this was clearly my opportunity to get what was mine and get out on my own.

And so about two months before the wedding, while they were still negotiating over my future sister-in-law's bride price and no one else would pay much attention, I went to my father and asked him for my share of the estate.

It would be less than half since the law stipulates that older son's inherit twice the property of younger sons. I would be happy to take it in cash and I knew that would mean I no longer would have any right to the property regardless of any increase in its value but what was that to me—all I wanted was to get away from here.

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I certainly couldn't have asked for my share if I'd planned to stay around—I'd be shunned by the entire community for my disrespect---to ask one's father for half his living is to treat him as already dead and gone.

Well, I meant no real disrespect—I didn't mean anything—it wasn't about my father, it was about me. It was about my life and my opportunity. I was leaving. My destiny lay out there.

I wasn't to remain in my own country either—because I knew social convention would follow me if I did. No, I wanted a complete break—I wanted to go some place where no one knew anything about me and where the ways of my people would not follow. So I went to the land of the Gentiles.

Life was sooo good and the women so lovely. I made friends quickly. I didn't know life could be so much fun! I figured I deserved a break—what could it hurt to enjoy life a little--and after I'd had my fun I'd do something with my life—

I guess you know what happened. Before I knew it I was in debt. Living it up took most of it. As I began to realize I was running out of money I tried my hand at the gambling. I did win and that emboldened me-it came so easy!

At first I swore as soon as I won enough I wouldn't gamble any more, I would use my money wisely—but I had so many debts to pay. So I continued. Then I began to lose. I grew desperate.

I even made offerings to some of their gods in hopes of improving my luck. I just needed enough to get a head again and then—what?

I knew I was kidding myself—the bills were mounting. I lost my apartment first. I begged the landlord for more time but he wouldn't listen And when I turned to my new friends for help they quickly cut me off once they realized I couldn't repay them. About that time there was a major crop failure—a

late frost. I didn't know what to do. For the first time in my life I was in true want—in fear of starving to death. Fortunately, I was also young and strong.

So I moved on further where no one would remember my former wealth and took a job as a hired hand on an estate very much like my father's--- for a man who sent me out to his fields to feed swine. Pigs!

Here I was starving while these filthy pigs had more to eat than I did! I envied them their carob pods. I would gladly eat them—and in fact I did because having renounced my family and community—no one knew me and no one gave me anything. I had nothing. How far I had fallen!

Two things I had in abundance: time and my own company. Sitting day after day in the mire of the swine pen, I began to consider my life. To take stock of things. To observe all that I had experienced, to look back and to face some hard realities. I realized for the first time in my life how hard my father had worked for all that he had given me. I realized how generous he was, not just with me and my brother but with everyone.

My father cared about every soul under his hire. Their welfare was his welfare. And I, in my arrogance, had blown him off—and squandered every precious cent he had so graciously and without question or rancor, bestowed upon me.

With my father I realized, it was never about the things he had—it was about his love for us and the good he could do for others. How he loved. How remarkable was the man who had been my father. For I knew I was no longer his son. I was dead to him after what I'd done.

How unworthy I was.

That realization hit me like scalding water. Shame enveloped me. I knew myself condemned by own undoing, my own pride and arrogance.

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And so I lay in the swine pen knowing myself a condemned man.

I was nothing—worth nothing to anyone. Fit for nothing other than to feed animals that the Torah declared were an abomination. Forbidden. When was the last time I had thought about the God of my father?

I cried out to God in my anguish to take my life. But I lived on. The more I cried out to God the more my father's image dominated my visage.

One early morning, before light as I lay among the sleeping pigs for warmth under the eve of the pen, with the spring rain drizzling down all around me and running in rivulets through the mud, I realized I could be working as a hired man in my own country just as well as work here for this Gentile.

I could be among my own community, near if not among my own family—out of the weather and fed. Every slave is worth his keep in my country. Every one of my father's hired hands had enough to eat and more to spare and here I am dying of hunger!

I came to myself as they say—I turned around and looked toward home. And as I looked I determined that day, "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of our hired hands."

I left as soon as the sun was up. I had nothing to take with me save the clothes on my back. I walked. It took three months to get home. I knew where to find the pigs and their pods until I came into my own land.

And once there I knew where to glean the fields—because the Torah didn't permit them to be stripped bare—the leavings were left for the widowed, the sojourner and the poor.

Every mouthful I gleaned was a grace and a reminder of my own past conceit that I didn't need my community, my family or my

father—I once thought I had no need of them or anyone.

Every step was humbling and humiliating as the truth dawned ever clearer. But it was also this truth that strengthened my resolve. If my father would hear me out I would make my confession – make it right with him before he died.

Before he died...what if he were already dead? That possibility unnerved me—more important than anything else now was coming before my father and giving him the satisfaction of my confession.

What happened after that was of no consequence. If he sent me away, it would be all I deserved. But I would honor him!

It was late in the day when I found myself within reach of my home. In spite of the setting sun's rays on the horizon ahead of me, I could see the buildings outlined in the distance on the hill where my father's house stood.

I was exhausted from the day's travel but I just couldn't stop so close to the goal of my journey. I trudged on, unaware of a figure coming toward me. Unaware that my father had been out for his evening walk through the property and that he had seen a figure approaching along the open road.

Curious at first he thought to simply amble a bit further to the edge of the property with one of the servants who would go out on the road and offer hospitality to the stranger, which was the customary way for the head of a clan to greet strangers.

He would never think of going down the road himself. It was unbecoming of a man of his class and status to do such a thing and would ruin his reputation.

His serving man seeing me—this stranger approaching made to move a head when my father's knowing eye took in my figure and my gait and knew in the depths of his heart that it was me.

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He commanded the servant to wait. And much to the man's great astonishment, took to the road himself—not simply walking but picking up the skirts of his robes he began to run and to yell and to wave his free arm. The servant was aghast at the sight.

Ashamed and embarrassed for his Master, he quickly looked around to see if anyone else was observing this demeaning spectacle! Seeing no one else about he took off after him in hopes of overcoming the Master to protect and salvage his honor.

As for myself, because of the setting sun silhouetting the figure running before me I didn't realize who it was. By the time I could make out his features he had his arms around me, and the most amazing thing of all—he kissed me! This act of forgiveness stunned me as if I had been slapped across the face! I'd had no opportunity to say a word!

Blinded with tears of remorse, and grabbing his garments I fell to my knees, and cried out, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and I know I am unworthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

But my father turned to his hired man who had caught up with him and who was even more astounded to see who it was that had caused his Master to behave in such an appallingly dishonoring way. Seeing me, my father's servant couldn't believe his eyes—anger began to pour across his face and I braced for the coming blow as he raised his arm to backhand me --when my father stepped between us—the man lunged sideways to avoid hitting him. While my father regained control of the situation, ignoring the prevented assault he commanded, "Quickly, bring my best robe, put a ring on his finger and put sandals on his feet!

Get that calf we've been fattening up and kill it—and send out to the whole neighborhood to come --- we shall eat and celebrate this night---for this son of mine— (with these words he literally pulled me up to

my feet with an amazing physical strength I had no idea he possessed)— "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again—he was lost and is found. We WILL celebrate!"

His words were like live coals on my head even as an unfathomable joy spread through my heart. With that he took firm hold of me and I, well, I was as obedient as a small child clinging to a lost parent. For surely I had been lost and now was found. I didn't want to let him out of my sight. He himself put this robe around my shoulders and this ring on my hand and these sandals on my feet.

Then he stood by my side and to every wondering eye he said, "Rejoice with me, this is my son who was lost but has returned! My son, my son is alive!"

Finally he left me when he received word late in the evening that my older brother refused to come in to the house for the celebration.

What did my father expect? How could he? I once again felt shame and I had compassion for my brother.

His n'er do-well brother has come back expecting a hand out and here I am sitting in his place with a feast spread before me while he's been out working all day? I would leave quietly.

Given the hour and the inebriation of the guests I was able to move towards the door when I found I was within hearing distance of my father and brother.

I heard my brother berating my father in a most disrespectful manner I recognized all too well—it was the way I too once spoke to him. Rudely upbraiding him without even addressing him as Father, he cried out what he saw as the injustice of the situation with regards to him—nothing about our father.

Had he not always been obedient? Had he not always worked hard.... What had he done that our father should favor me, the younger and irresponsible son, over him?

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How I recognized myself in my brother!
It wasn't about his relationship with his father.
He knew and cared little about how much my
father had already done for him, given him,
loved him!

It was all about HIM, just as it had
been all about ME—what he had earned, what
he had coming to him, how he had been
shortchanged.

With a deep bitterness I heard him cry,
"Listen, for all these years I have been working
like a slave for you (working like a slave for
my father? Working for his own betterment
because he knows he gets all the property
now that I am out of the way!) ...he went on,
"But when this son of yours (he did not once
say,"my brother,") when this son of yours
came back, who has devoured your property
with prostitutes; YOU killed the fatted calf for
him!

I have never disobeyed your command;
yet you have never given me even so much as
a young goat so that I might celebrate with MY
friends!"

I now felt a different kind of sorrow for
my brother—I felt pity for his blindness, for his
inability to see what he had right in front of
him! I wanted to step forward then and there
and defend my father when my father stepped
forward.

He embraced my brother as he had
embraced me on the road, and addressing
him with deep respect he said, "Son, you are
always with me, and all that is mine is yours.
But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because
this *brother of yours*—(This brother of yours—
that said it all—about our father I mean. Once
more I was astonished by the depth and
breadth of my father's love for us and how we
were his first priority—not his honor, not his
status, not his estate or wealth—but us and
our relationship with each other.)

My father said, "This brother of yours
was dead and has come to life; he was lost
and has been found. Celebrate with me. Join
in my joy!"

With that my father stepped back from
my brother and there was silence. I waited
wondering what my brother's decision would
be.

What would you do? Would you go in to
the party? Could you join be glad for me and
glad for my father?

What counts most to you? Merit or
mercy?

My brother spent his whole life
stretching himself out of shape to conform to
the demands of what he believed our father
had expected of him.

Believing he would gain his father's
favor as a direct result of what he earned
through obedience.

And by the same token, he knew I had
rebelled, had earned no merit and therefore
deserved nothing. It was very clear, very cut
and dry for him. This was an injustice, pure
and simple.

What he couldn't see was how his self-
righteousness in judging me put him as far off
from my father as my journey to a far-off land
had put distance between us.

While in my rebelling and stumbling—
stripped of all pretense to goodness and
righteousness— I had the unexpected good
fortune of coming to myself—of coming into
wholeness as a direct result of awakening to
the truth about myself.

The truth was I knew very clearly I had
no merit. Period. I could never merit my
father's love but I could turn around, go home
and attempt to remedy the wrong I had done. I
did not expect forgiveness. But my brother
expected an apology from my father. He felt
betrayed. In truth neither of us merited his
love.

The odd thing was what my father had:
Mercy. Mercy for both of us. He addressed us
both as son. He embraced us both. He
forgave us both. He did not judge our worth by
whether we had pleased him or not. Nor

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did he succumb to the temptation to reciprocate our alienation by separating himself from us. When we withdrew he moved in closer to embrace us! He loved us more than his own life.

What can I say? My father has taught me a great deal about loving and relationships—about the grace of God and how we can receive it. Again, I ask you, what would you do? Would you be able to join in the celebration?

Jesus parable of the Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father and the Angry Older Brother makes it clear:

Only those who can genuinely celebrate God's grace to others can experience it for themselves.