

## When Love Abounds

Luke 15:11-32

Richard C. Allen

November 22, 2009

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Most evenings, I make a pot of rice for supper. I measure carefully, one cup of rice, two cups of water plus an ooch, and a pinch of salt. I bring it to a boil then let it simmer on the lowest heat setting for 25 minutes. However, here's what usually happens. While I'm waiting for the water and rice to come to a boil, I hurry to the mailbox or try to repair something or...basically I get distracted. What calls me back to the stove is that sound of boiling rice oozing out of the pot, down the side of the pot and caking itself onto the burner.

This sight used to bother me. But now I sort of like it. I like the image of things boiling over, bubbling out of their containers, bursting their bounds. I like that word 'effervescence.' I like it that some commodities refuse to be contained in their assigned vessels. Just like this cornucopia on the communion table. Look! The basket can't possibly hold all the produce! I like it most of all when the uncontainable thing is love. The most satisfying, most gratitude-producing sight I can imagine is love bubbling up and out of the men and the women and the children who try so hard to keep it all neatly tucked inside. I like it best when love has its own way, when love refuses to be contained.

This is precisely how I have come to understand the Parable of The Prodigal Son, or, as some prefer, the Parable of the Loving Parent. My understanding of a parable, generally, is that the listener is not to get bogged down by the details of the story, but is to see the big picture, the one abiding truth. I can remember having knock down, drag out battles with my mother-in-law over the plight of the older

brother. She always took his side. I remember debating one person over what she considered to be a terrible disrespect for pigs. I've gotten all wrapped up in what sort of 'loose living' the younger son might have gotten himself involved with. But to get tangled in the web of details is to risk missing the point Jesus was trying to make: namely;

**Love is that awesome force that refuses to be contained, that just bubbles up and out of us and spills into the world as a healing ointment spills out of a broken jar.**

In this parable, I see the father figure as the one whose love can not be contained, not for a single moment. I see the two sons as the recipients of that poured out affection. I see that the feast at the end of the story is really a Thanksgiving feast. The older brother doesn't quite see it that way by the story's end, but he will. Give him time. He will.

Picture the father out on the front porch, right hand to the forehead blocking the rays of the setting sun, eyes peeled for any sign of the lost child's return. Catching a glimpse of the boy, maybe just a hint of his gait or of his hair line or the rotation of his shoulders, the father doesn't stand there and calculate the inheritance frittered away, doesn't spend a second on harsh judgment, not an ounce of energy pondering how the boy might be punished. He runs, not walks, not trots, RUNS across that meadow and throws his arms around that child. Only love matters. The love just bubbles up out of his heart. There's no holding it back, no keeping it inside.

Picture the father going out from the party to console the older brother who feels terribly neglected. He knows exactly how the older boy is feeling. He doesn't launch into some intellectual sermon, he simply invites the young man to come into the circle of love, come into that place where no one keeps score, where there are not winners and losers, where everyone's hunger for love is

satisfied, where there's enough to go around! Only love matters. There's no holding it back, no keeping it tucked neatly inside.

That's how we know Christ is born. That's how we know Christ is risen. Where love bubbles up out of its vessel, that's where the Kingdom of God is revealed.

As Thanksgiving approaches this week, what I am thankful for is every pot of rice that boils over, every occasion of failure to contain love's effervescence, every story of love's insistence upon having its own way.

This fall, one of our South Church daughters, a freshman at UConn, took terribly ill. Her fever soared to 105. Her body convulsed without ceasing. A tub of ice couldn't diminish the fever. Her parents maintained a constant vigil. From a regular room to the Intensive Care Unit to the special wing for heart patients, they kept moving Siobhan Wilcox to the care of different specialists. When she was finally able to speak, the words came out one at a time, barely audible. I happened to be there in her room on a Sunday afternoon when the Allen twins, classmates from Glastonbury High School, fellow lacrosse varsity athletes, came by for a visit. It's the visit I want to describe. After some chit chat, girl talk, these Allen twins started pulling out beautifully wrapped gifts, each one carefully selected. Lip balm. Chocolate chip cookies. Skin cream. The gifts kept coming. Every time Siobhan managed to open one, her smile grew a little wider. By the time she had opened the 17<sup>th</sup> gift, it was as if her fever had lifted. The three of them sat there laughing and hugging and laughing some more. The adults in the room stood there in silence, knowing we had witnessed a love that could not be contained, love as God intends it. It wasn't about the gifts; it was about the love among friends

Later, when the food service people arrived with her dinner tray, it was a Thanksgiving feast they were serving. They couldn't have known that. But that's what it was.

It was a Thanksgiving feast because love had burst out of its vessel and spilled itself all over that hospital room. I may even have gotten a little of it on myself!

Perhaps, this Thursday, you will find yourself at a table where someone invites you to name your gratitude. And you'll be ready to respond because you will have been reflecting all week on those Prodigal Son moments, those Loving Parent episodes, when you witnessed love poured out freely, abundantly. These are the times that describe what Jesus had in mind when he announced, the Kingdom of God has drawn near. In the greatest of hope, Amen!