**The Recovery of Joy**

A Sermon by Dewey Williams

9:00 a.m., April 30, 2017

Central Prison, Death Row

Raleigh, NC

*But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 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 your hired hands.’”* - Luke 15:17-19 (NRSV)

Introduction:

I am continuing our series of sermons on Joy and the Good Life. My premise is that the joy of Jesus is real and powerful. It is so real and powerful that it reaches people wherever they are. I believe that joy can reach all the way into the lives of men on death row. Do I have a witness here today that is willing to say that you have joy and that it makes a difference in your life?

The parable of the Prodigal Son is a story told from the lips of Jesus that is a capsule of the biblical worldview of humanity’s engagement with divinity. It is a synopsis of the good news that the Bible offers to all who will hear and believe. The parable’s two primary characters are a loving and benevolent father and a young and restless son. The father represents God, and the young son represents the humanity that is always seeking to find its place in God’s world.

I guess if we were to describe this young man’s family of origin, we would say he had the good life because under his father’s control all his needs were being met. Some would argue that all the ingredients were present to describe a joyous life. All the food, clothing, and shelter were available to him, but there was a problem. This young man did not feel in control of his life and that too much of his life was dependent upon his father. He had grown weary of daddy’s rules and expectations. This young man wanted to set his own course and make a name for himself independent of his father’s arranging.

In the parable the young son acted on the impulse to seek his life outside of the provisions and oversight of his father and he goes to his father and demands of his father to give him the share of property that would someday belong to him. The father obliges and gives the young son his premature estate package. The young man takes his portion of goods and leaves from his father’s house and goes to a far-off country. Let me add some commentary here. The far country represents a separation from God. Whenever you go away from God you are going to the far country. If you stay in town but go away from God, you are in the far country. If you live at the same address and go away from God, you are in the far country. It was selfish pursuits that led this young man away from his father and it is selfish pursuits that take you away from God. When you become first you are moving to the far country. When you as an individual say you are first, or we as a people say that we are first we are moving away from God and going to the far country. Be careful of the America First movement. America First is the vocabulary of the far country; far, far away from God.

Jesus tells us that the young man squandered his possessions once he got to the far country and on top of that a famine hit the land. He went from a place where he and everyone around him were provided for, to a situation where he and everyone around him were facing the plight of dire poverty. While things were bad in the land, it got worse when his well-groomed resume only led him to a man who hired him out to work in a pigpen. This citizen of the far country pimped him out to do a job that was demeaning and disgusting. Let me add another commentary right here. There is always somebody who wants to pimp you out to do a job that is demeaning and disgusting. There is always somebody who wants to take advantage of you and use your body for their profit and gain. Even prisoners, (let me say especially prisoners) get pimped out behind locked bars and gates by a prison industrial complex.

Now we find this young man in the pigpen with hunger grabbing at both his belly and his psyche. He is so hungry that he is thinking about eating what the pigs are eating. It is at this point that the spark of recovering joy is ignited. It is at this moment of lowest self-worth that joy goes to work and starts to reclaim this young man’s dignity. Jesus said that the young man came to himself and started talking about his father. He came to himself and said, “My father”. He came to himself and said, ‘Daddy’, ‘Papa’, ‘Pops’, ‘Padre’’ ‘Dadeo’, ‘Pa’. Let me add another commentary here. Whenever you come to yourself you will find God. Whenever you arrived at who you really are you will find God. Mahalia Jackson used to sing a song that said:

Without God, I would be nothing.

Without God I would fail.

Without God my life would be rugged,

like a ship, without a sail.

When he came to himself, he realized that he did not have to eat what the pigs were eating. He realized that the pig’s food was not fit for his consumption. Understand this, consumption is not limited to food. There is pigpen food, which is not fit to consume, but there is also pigpen thinking, which is not fit to consume. Pigpen thinking that leads to racism, sexism, classism, notions of gender superiority, and materialism. There is pigpen thinking, which is not fit to consume, but there is also pigpen religion, which is not fit to consume. Pigpen religion that is poison to your soul; that fills people with fear; that makes you hate yourself; that turns you against another group of people and wants to keep you and others ignorant. That is pigpen religion, and you don’t have to consume it.

This young man realized that he did not have to eat what the pigs were consuming and today, those in prison do not get to pick from a vast array of food options, but you can pick the ideas that you consume and the religion you consume. You do not have to consume what the pigs are eating. You are locked up physically behind bars and your body is forced to comply with the rules of the state but hear me. Your mind and your spirit are free, and you don’t have to consume with your mind and your spirit what the pigs are consuming.

Once this young man came to himself, he made three statements that lead him on the pathway to joy. He made statements about provisions, about confession, and about aspirations. Walk with me briefly around the text as we look at these statements.

First, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!” His statement about his father having enough for hired hands indicates that he is saying that he knows that his father has enough provisions to take care of him even as he wallows in the pigpen. He realized that his father has everything that he needed and that his father is a provider who has ample resources that could take care of him and that his father has plenty. This realization that the young man had is a realization that you and I need to grasp hold of today. God has everything that we need. I don’t care what your need is, God has it and has plenty. God has what you need and is willing to provide what you need in your life. I did not say God would provide everything you want. God does not always grant what we want, but God will meet our needs. Some of you want to get off of death row, but you need for you children to be taken care of. God may not get you off of death row, but God will provide for your children. Joy’s recovery starts when you realize God’s provisions will meet your needs.

Next the young man discusses confession and says,**“**I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.” He realized that his selfish pursuits caused a break in relationship with his father. That his sin disrupted and spoiled the relationship that he and his father once shared, and that confession was the only way to lead to reconciliation and the only way to purity was through confession. I am not preaching to get you to confess your wrongs to the State of North Carolina. I don’t know your case and do not pretend to offer legal advice about your case, but I do know that confession to God about whatever sin is in your life is always in order. It is right and good for you to go to God and to tell God that you realize that you have sinned; fallen short of God’s glory; and missed the mark that you know God has set for you. You must humble yourself and confess to God that you are a sinner. And low and behold, there is a freedom that comes to your spirit when you make a genuine confession to God. This soul freedom promotes joy’s recovery.

Finally, this young man speaks about aspiration when he says, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ He saw himself better than his pigpen existence. He could not see himself returning as a son, but perhaps as a hired hand, and that would be better than where he currently was. The recovery of joy for the young man was his saying I am not going to be stuck in the quagmire of this pigpen. I am going to get up and go home to my father for something better. Anything my father has is better than the pigpen. Today, God has better for you than a life defeated and dejected while you serve your time on death row. You can live with victory in your spirit and joy in your heart because God put hope and light in your pathway. Joy and hope are interwoven in the fabric of a Christian’s spirit. Your hope produces joy, and your joy reproduces hope.

Conclusion:

I cannot leave this message without mentioning the reunification of the young man with his father. Jesus tells us that the father had been looking for the son and when he saw him coming home the father ran to him and hugged him and kissed him. The son started his speech confessing his sin and saying he was not worthy to be called his son. But before he got to the line were asked to be made a hired servant the father stopped him and ordered a servant to go to his closet and get robe. He ordered a servant to go to his jewelry box and get a ring. He ordered a servant to go to his shoe rack and get some sandals. He ordered a servant to go to the barn and get the fatted calf. All of this was because his son had returned home. You see, what the son had aspired to get from his father did not match all that his father had for his son’s return home. In like manner God has provisions that will exceed all that you ever have hoped and dreamed for, but first the recovery of joy looks for your declaration of God’s provision, you’re making a confession of sinfulness, and the fruit of that will be aspirational hope.

The choice is yours to make. Will you participate in the recovery of joy that God offers through Jesus Christ?