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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
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### Our Rebirth

Good morning church. Today's text asks us the question, what does it mean to forgive and welcome the tax collector and the sinner like Jesus did. Is this text calling us to grow from the foolishness of our youth or to welcome people wherever they are? Why not both?

Prayer: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

How many of you have experienced rebirth?

Depends on how you think about it. In a way, we are reborn every new day, the sun rises and we get another chance to finish that yard work before the summer heat drives us inside. In another way, we have grown and been reborn throughout our entire lives.

One of my biology professors said, five years ago I was a fool who knew nothing, and now I am mature and got it all figured out. The problem is that five years ago I thought the same way about me ten years ago and in five years I'm going to think the current me is a blockhead. I can relate.

I know that Lent tends to be about repentance, which can morph into feelings of shame. Like the Lord of the Universe is fed by us feeling bad about ourselves. But, what I hope we can walk away from this passage today is that transformation... rebirth.... Reinvention is a core part of our lenten walk through this bountiful desert.

So in a way, yes, many of us here have been reborn, grown from the foolishness of youth to a little less foolish adulthood. Many of us have learned about things the hard way. Perhaps a breakup or divorce gave us wisdom about marriage. Perhaps a visit to the dentist has convinced us that brushing and flossing once a week was insufficient (talking about myself). Now, I would prefer to learn from a less cruel teacher, but failure can teach us better than our successes.

This brings me to one of the Bible's greatest failure stories.

The first thing you've got to understand is the parable is a strange sort of story. It begins with a disarmingly simple story, but then there is a twist that perplexes and teaches us. So, a boy squanders his inheritance in loose living. Maybe this was the sort of story that good Godly people use to describe these tax collectors and sinners. It is similar to how today people call homeless people drug addicts or mentally ill. Or how people blame unwed mothers (and only the mothers) for being foolish or blaming gay men for the HIV epidemic. It's a blame story, where

people get what they deserve. Even the younger son knows he is in a blame story, saying that he is not worthy to be called his father's son. The elder son knows this too, decrying the unfairness of rewarding a wayward son. But then, there is a great twist. The father sees him while he is still far off and is filled with compassion, runs out to put his arms around his beloved son, and throws a party.

Jesus's parable is unexpected. Even shocking. The listener would expect that the father would have disowned his son, but the father stands vigil looking out at the horizon of the road. Even then, the heads of the household did not run to meet people, but the father shamefully runs to meet his son. Even then, the father should have reprimanded his son, that is the core of a blame story that the wayward are punished. However, the father embraces him, places expensive clothes and jewelry on him, and slaughters the fatted calf. Something reserved for a major festival, like the feast of Passover.

And the elder son is not happy. Because it is just not fair. And yes, he's right. It is not fair that the younger son gets a party when the loyal dependable elder son is given nothing. The elder son feels entitled to the father's rewards. I wonder if that is how good Godly people feel sometimes. That going to church every Sunday means we deserve praise and leadership positions. If I am anyone in this story, I am the elder son.

And the father's rationale for this party. we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"  
Jesus what does this mean!?!

Yes, the younger son has repented, grown in maturity, and therefore is deserving of forgiveness. Many of us can understand that a turn of heart warrants celebration.

Honestly, as I read this story, it appears that the father just does not care. He does not even listen to his younger son's self-deprecation. He pleads against the righteous indignation of the elder son. The father is simply joyful that his younger son is back; safe and sound. His son is reborn, he came to his senses and returned to his family. His presence is enough. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners because they invite him to their table. The invitation is enough.

In the announcement section of our bulletin, it reads, Welcome. We are glad you are here. We want you to know that no matter who you are, or what your experiences in life have been, you are welcome here at our church. This reminds me a lot of the father's response.

Whoever you are there will be a celebration that you are here. Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, come to the table of God. Presbyterians and Baptists let us study the Word together. People without religion, let us rethink the old God that drove you away from the church in the first

place. Mennonite Brethren who feel cast away, let us discover the heart of Anabaptism together. There is a party! A celebration and rejoicing because you are here.

Sometimes I wonder if that is what the Holy Spirit is teaching us through the Bible today. That God's table is ever-growing, being reborn into something new and exciting. That God's love is a wasteful and shameful love that is running toward you in the dusty road. Welcoming everyone to the feast. So who are we to act like entitled elder sons or shamed younger sons. God calls us neither to condescension nor guilt, but to joy! Christ calls us to a life of learning from our mistakes because mercy and forgiveness abound. "Have you proclaimed psalms of forgiveness but not offered them within. Oh, the Spirit, she was singing even when we could not hear her abundant streams of living, waiting for us to come near." (VT 42) Amen.