



## My Mother Taught Me About Celebration

My mother loved to have parties, celebrations, and any occasion to get people together and have fun. She and Dad often included others in their own wedding anniversary celebrations and birthday parties. Over the 4th of July holiday, they often hosted a "Craig birthday party" to celebrate the birthdays of my sister, her husband, their son, and their grandson which all fall around the July 4th date (not to mention my sister and her husband's anniversary which is also that time of July). Then Mother and Dad would follow that with a Labor Day weekend celebration because my younger sister, my mother, and I all have birthdays in early September. Just about any excuse for a celebration would do. Sometimes it was for graduations, other times it was for special events, and many times it was just a plan to get people together for a party or a dinner without any real reason. My mother loved to host celebrations.

She and Dad often hosted dinner parties for their friends with themes involved. They would decorate around a theme, they often composed limericks for each couple or for the occasion, and they would select the menu around that same theme. My favorite story of Mother's preparation for a celebration is the fact that for years she would prepare for the arrival of Ed McMahon to award her with the sweepstakes prize. I often said, "Mother, your chances of winning are very slight," and she would respond, "Yes, but I want to be ready in case they come." So she would prepare cheese and crackers, some desert, and put on a pot of coffee – all in case she won. It would be terrible to be caught unprepared to celebrate!

All of which is why we tried to make Mother's funeral a celebration, including giving out chocolate to everyone who attended. We also had white helium balloons surrounding her casket, because she had once mentioned, "I want white balloons at my funeral so it will be a celebration." Mother loved to celebrate life.

I think of her attitude when I read the famous parable of Jesus in Luke 15 which we often call "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." In that story, a young son demands his share of the inheritance, runs off and wastes the money, finally comes to his senses, and returns home. While he is a long way off, his father sees him, runs to him, and welcomes him home – throwing a party and treating him like a son again. But the real point of the story is found in the closing verses when the elder brother sees the celebration and refuses to come to the party. He protests to his father that he has been loyal and hard-working, and yet his father has rewarded the wayward son. The father replies, "We have to celebrate," and he leaves the elder son with the choice of whether or not he will join the celebration.

I have long believed that the real title of that parable is "The Elder Brother's Choice" because that is

clearly the point Jesus is making to the so-called religious people of the day. Will they stand outside the party, trusting in their own goodness, or will they come celebrate that many new and unexpected persons are finding faith and salvation through Jesus?

How about us? Are we as Christian ready to celebrate? Do our church services look like celebrations of what God is doing in our lives? Do we keep the coffee pot on and have the cheese and crackers prepared ... just in case someone new shows up at our churches or in homes? Do we rejoice when anyone who has been lost and confused starts to find their way with God? Do we celebrate when the unexpected persons show up and want to be a part of the Christian community?

I notice that many, many Christians today waste a lot of energy worrying about who is "worthy" to be a part of the church and the faith. I remember a professor in seminary who said that the whole point of the Invitation to Holy Communion is that we are all "equally unworthy" of God's grace. That is the point of Communion, and indeed that is the point of everything we say and do in church. We are a part of the Christian community not because of our goodness, but because of God's grace.

Our response to the grace of God is to follow my Mother's lead: celebrate!