

# VIVE LA COMPAGNIE!

Sermon, March 6, 2016

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Texts: II Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15 1-3, (4-10), 11-32

How many here remember the song associated with the sermon title? (*at the early service, nobody raised a hand, but when I started "singing," more than few joined in!*)

"Let every good fellow, now join in our song, Vive la compagnie! Success to each other, and pass it along, Vive la compagnie!  
Vive la, vive la, Vive l'amour. Vive la, vive la, Vive l'amour. Vive l'amour, vive l'amour, Vive la compagnie!!"

The English word "company" has its origins in the Old French military term "compagnie," meaning a "body of soldiers", but its etymological origin is found in the Latin "companion," from which we get the word "companion." To put it a little simplistically, the Latin terms "com" (with) and "panis" (bread) are merged in *companionio*; a companion is someone with whom you break bread, someone with whom you eat. Usage of the word company to mean "business association" was first recorded in 1553 ... etymologically, perhaps it intimates people you MAKE bread with in business (*that's my admittedly ignorant speculation*). Anyway, the French "*Vive la Compagnie!*" can be strictly interpreted to mean "*long live our military group*" OR, more broadly, "*Long live our companionship.*" And "*Vive l'amour*" – Long live **love**; long live that emotional bond, that love, that commitment, that saving and redeeming force which binds us together in companionship.

Well, the Pharisees are certainly NOT singing "Vive la Compagnie" in today's reading; they are criticizing Jesus for the **company** he keeps. They are somewhat smugly and self-righteously muttering about the company He keeps. What a wonderfully descriptive word, muttering ... you can almost hear the snide and sputtering spitefulness in the word as you imagine these self-righteous people m-m-m-grr-m-muttering, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (*I didn't say this during the sermon, but "muttering" might even qualify as an onomatopoeia ... a word that phonetically imitates the sound it describes*). The Pharisees were muttering that Jesus was the *companion* of sinners (*as, indeed, some translations have it*), as if to imply He is displaying His true character by who He hangs out with, who He eats bread with, who He chooses as His friends. As a little aside, here's an old riddle from JR Tolkein's The Hobbit:

"Voiceless it cries, Wingless it flutters,  
toothless it bites, mouthless it mutters."

The answer? It's the wind. Think of the (a) crying, howling wind; (b) the fluttering breeze; (c) the biting cold, (d) the hauntingly ethereal moan of the empty wasteland. Well, I'd like to make the (*admittedly loose*) observation/connection that mutterers, like these Pharisees, are often full of wind. Wind bags. The mutterings of these religious windbags is what triggers the three parables of Jesus in Luke 15. Jesus responds to the mutterers with three parables. It's important to remember, by the way, that Jesus' primary audience for these parables is not the "sinners" with whom He is eating; Jesus is directing these parables to the Pharisees, the religiously righteous.

In the first story, the good shepherd leaves his ninety-nine sheep to go out and find that one sheep who got lost; he wants to bring it back into the "compagnie" of the other sheep (*so the lost sheep can better "vive", live!*). The good shepherd searches the wilderness, and on finding the lost sheep he says, "Rejoice with me, for the lost is found!" (*And I can imagine the religious leaders muttering amongst themselves, "That irresponsible shepherd! He left the other ninety-nine sheep unguarded, unwatched, untended while he went after the one idiot sheep who wandered away. Better to just let the one irresponsible idiot go in order to better protect the herd! Besides, the one who wandered off should get what it deserves; that'll teach the others to stay put."*) The obvious implication of Jesus is that God cares about all His sheep, and when even one gets lost, He is passionately concerned the lost be found and restored and brought back into the loving "compagnie" of the fold.

In the second story, a poor woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She tears the house apart looking for it, moving the furniture, vacuuming under the beds ... I know they didn't have vacuums in those days, but if they did, she would have been using one. On finally finding the lost coin, she says like the good shepherd in the first parable, "Rejoice with me, for the lost is found!" (*And I can well imagine the religious leaders muttering, "Hmmp. Silly woman. If she kept a neat house in the first place, she wouldn't have had to waste so much time and energy looking for that lost coin!"*) After both stories, Jesus says there is great rejoicing throughout all of heaven whenever the lost are found, whenever those who have wandered off find their way back to the fold, the household, back to where they belong.

You see, Jesus was a Savior who welcomed, embraced and even sought after the lost, those who have lost their way and/or maybe never really understood the way, and/or those who have wandered away from the "compagnie" of the family of God ... and this tendency of the Savior often provoked and/or irritated those who were a part of the religious "establishment." Jesus often and always viewed the people around Him as potential miracles waiting to happen; His was a wonder-working God who delighted in restoring damaged lives. The ones who tried Jesus' patience the most were those like these Pharisees who thought *others* needed fixing, not them; those who could see what's wrong with everyone else except themselves. As Jesus kept reminding people, He was a Savior, and He had

come to seek and engage and even rescue those who had lost their way, to save, *salvage*, lives that were self-destructing, to bring them all back to home to the Father and the good company of the household of God.

Jesus then launches into the third parable, subtitled in our pew Bibles as "The Parable of the Lost Son", but it really should be subtitled "The Parable of the Lost Sons" ... for this is just as much a parable of the second son as it is of the first. Both these sons have serious issues, both of these sons are in a snit with their father and both act out in very different ways; this "Tale of Two Snitties" is a story of repentance and forgiveness and grace, but it is also a story of resentment, self-righteousness, and anger and the destruction that all brings to the "compagnie."

The first son said, "*Father, give me my share of the estate.*" What this boy is asking for is outrageous. Essentially he is saying to his father, "*I can't wait for you to die. I just want what you have; I want all the benefits and blessings of being your child, I just don't want you. I don't want to live under your roof and I don't want to live by your rules and I don't want to associate with your family, and I can manage things just fine if you'll just give me what I want.*" But what might be more outrageous to Jesus' audience is that the father actually gave the rude and stupid kid what he wanted. As Jesus tells the story, this young man quickly packs up, liquidates his assets, and goes far, far away. He goes off to a distant place, wastefully spends and squanders everything (*which is where the word "prodigal" comes from; it means "rashly or wastefully extravagant"*). This far country then undergoes a famine. The young man attaches himself to an apparently well-off citizen in that country, someone who has livestock during the famine. Jesus' audience knew just how far this young man had sunk when they hear the job he has taken: he is tending pigs. No self-respecting Jew would go anywhere near a pig. This boy is miserable, broke, starving, living with the pigs and probably like a pig, and he is dependent upon pigs for his income (*some of you may be thinking, "I've had jobs like that!"*). If Jesus was telling a simple morality story, this could very well be seen as the moral: "*You act like a pig and you will end up like a pig! The End.*" The sinner got what he deserved.

But the story doesn't end there. As mentioned last week, at times people can come to that bottom point in their lives where they just grow weary of the manure, the waste, that has piled up in their lives largely as a result of their going in wrong directions, and this waste actually becomes a fertilizer that helps them grow, repent, return to their senses. We are told this young man "*comes to his senses*" and decides to return back home to the father. "*I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.*" You know the story: When the father sees his son coming, runs out to meet him, embraces him, orders the best robe, calls for a celebration and a feast of fatted calf! The father won't have anything to do with this "hired servant" nonsense. He doesn't want a servant, he wants a son! He wants the son to live in his house, in companionship with his family and have a seat at the family table and join in with the rest of the family singing "Vive la Compaigne!" In a word, this father, like God the Father, wants His children to come back home and experience the fullness of the Father's love, grace, generosity and joy and to be part of the Family.

Now, remember, He isn't telling this story to the people who wound up in the pig pen like the prodigal son -- the tax collectors and sinners and down-and-outers. No, Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, hoping they will see themselves in the "older son" in this parable. The older son, the good boy who stayed home and dutifully did his chores, comes in from working in the field, and when he learns what is going on, he refuses to participate in the festivities. He MUTTERS in so many words, "*My brother is back? Why celebrate that? That squandering, loose-living, irresponsible brat deserves something all right, but it certainly isn't a banquet! He deserves to be back in that pig-pen he wound up in!*" Now, on one hand, he has a point. This older son represents much of what we value: responsibility, hard work, perseverance, dependability. What would happen if everyone acted like the younger son and no one like this older brother? What would happen to our traditions, our homes, our economy, our churches, if everyone just quit their job, liquidated their assets, and ran off to some far off land like, oh, Connecticut and squandered it all at Foxwoods? However, this eldest son is also representing attitudes we shouldn't value: the attitude of a disgruntled servant, not a loving son, and the attitude of a spiteful, merciless, even cold "sibling" with no compassion for his brother who had lost his way. Verse 29, he says to his father, "*Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.*" Now, "slaving" is hardly descriptive of a warm relationship toward the father. This is the attitude of a servant, an employee, a hired hand, one who is doing all he does because it's a duty, not a privilege nor a joy nor a calling, and certainly not out of love and devotion and gratitude to the Father and for all the Father had provided for him his whole life long.

Jesus hopes His Pharisee listeners will see themselves as the angry older brother in the courtyard, find the proper conclusion to the parable in their own hearts, come to the Father's house and join in the celebration and sing "Vive la compaigne!" with the returned and restored and formerly lost. This is what God intends life to be all about. The Christian life is not just a set of joy-less rules to be obeyed. It is, instead, a loving relationship with God the Father, and as that relationship grows, we find the things that cause God joy cause us joy as well ... like when the lost are found, and when straying sheep return to the fold, when brothers and sisters and friends and neighbors come to their senses and seek their way back to the loving Father and the fellowship of the family household of the Father. And we do things for God, good things, not because we have to, but because we *get* to, we want to. This God doesn't want us be like the older brother, defining ourselves as slaves doing our joyless duties out of some misguided pietism. Through Jesus Christ we are sons and daughters of God. Sons and daughters; not slaves! Sons and daughters who dine at the family table (*as this was a Communion Sunday, at this point I directed attention to the Table in the chancel*).

Vive la Compaigne! AND vive l'amour ... long live the love of the Savior who redeems, restores and saves us.