

**S**chadenfreude  
Luke 15 : 1-7  
September 16, 2007

*This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.*

Dear Friends:

As we all settle in the season of fall there's great anticipation by corporate America and the television industry that we'll all comfortably plant ourselves in front of the television. This evening you can tune into the Emmy's on ABC after you've spent the afternoon watching the NFL. It'll be five more months before you'll be able to tune into Hollywood's other big event-- the Academy Awards. Behind the famed NFL extravaganza - the Super Bowl, the Oscars is the biggest television event of the year.

The Academy Awards shows us society in full glitz and excess. The parade of rich and famous emerging from limousines is fantasy brought to life. We strain for a glimpse of our favorite personality as they wave to the crowd and make their way down the red carpet and into the Kodak Theater.

Inside the theater we are treated to lavish production numbers and a montage of sight and sound that dazzles. While this is all very engaging, the best part come when the awards are actually announced.

You perhaps have watched and know the routine. The presenter reads through the five names of the nominated actors or actresses. We see their corresponding film clips. Then as the envelope is opened, the TV screen is divided so we can watch each of the five actors. Evident on their faces is anticipation and suspense. Then, the moment of truth: *"And the Oscar goes to . . ."*

When the winner's name is heard, for a split second we see the reactions of the five nominees and, if you watch closely, you can spot three emotions:

**The first is surprise.** Win or lose the announcement has shock value. That's why we're watching in the first place. We want to know who wins. Whether we agree with the choice or not, the moment we learn the winner's name, there is surprise.

The **second emotion** is a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment. The winner leaps from his seat in jubilation and pride at the acclaim his work has received. The losers' faces show disappointment. Some of them do the best acting of their careers in the two seconds that follow the announcement.

The third emotion is much more difficult to detect, and somewhat unsettling to identify. Our language doesn't have a word for this emotion. The Germans do and the word is *schadenfreude*. What is it? It's that feeling of glee when another person loses, fails or makes a mistake.

Schadenfreude is simply rejoicing in the losses or misery of another person. Schadenfreude is an emotion which permeates the Biblical story you heard today about the two brothers and their father. Watching the Academy Awards, sometimes we're pleased a certain actor doesn't win. It's pretty harmless to experience a little glee at such a loss. But I fear schadenfreude is deeply seated in humanity. It's all around us.

Look at a newspaper or watch the TV news. The opening stories and headlines offer up a schadenfreude smorgasbord: "Teen Star Arrested in Drug Bust," "Senator Caught in Sex Sting," "Priest Denies Misconduct with Teenager." People devour this kind of information. The market for such stories has

grown dramatically in the past decade because people seek schadenfreude.

Now, I know we're all good people and we don't like to talk about other people's failures, losses or mistakes. It makes us uncomfortable to admit that we know the feelings of schadenfreude. We don't want to admit that there's an ounce of joy that bubbles within us when others make a mistake or fail. But I suspect we all at some time we have known such perverse joy.

Schadenfreude is our human concept of justice. When we believe someone should lose or pay a price for their mistakes – and we're happy when it happens – that's human justice. When a driver flies past us on the interstate and a few minutes later we come upon that driver who's been stopped by a patrol officer – we feel satisfaction in justice administered. And we feel good about that!

In today's Bible reading, the older brother in the story had a similar idea of justice. Here's the eldest son - the responsible one who has stayed on the farm, worked hard, pleased his father and stood in stark contrast to his younger brother. That brother had earlier convinced his father to give him his inheritance so that he could get off the farm and go and live life as he wanted to. And that's exactly what he did!

The older brother isn't disappointed that his younger brother, that impulsive, disrespectful kid is out of the picture. He thinks to himself, *"If there is any justice in God's good creation, my little brother is either begging for food, or wasting away in jail. In any event, he is, as far as the family is concerned, dead. What a loser."*

Well, as Jesus tells this story, the picture changes when the elder son notices someone coming down the road late one day. Straining to identify this silhouette, he gasps, *"Oh my, is that my kid brother? Could it be? No! Oh - and*

*there goes Dad out to confront him. Oh, this is going to be sweet! That kid is finally gonna get what he deserves."* Schadenfreude.

But something unbelievable happens. The father welcomes his younger son and escorts him into the house. There's no berating him. There's no tirade from dad. He doesn't scream at the younger son "Do you know how worried I was about you? Or "Where's the money - what did you do with all the money I gave you?" The father's joy is evident as he wraps the boy in his own robe and lavishes attention upon him.

Then, according to the eldest son, comes more insult. A huge party is thrown in honor of this kid brother who's come home after he's blown the inheritance and didn't have anywhere else to go and nothing to eat. This is preposterous the eldest exclaims. "There's no way I'll have anything to do with this party. That boy deserves no such thing!"

As Jesus finishes telling this story, we never get to find out if the elder son ever changes his attitude and reconciles with his brother. We don't get to know if the family harmony is restored. Jesus doesn't say another word about any of this. But this much is certain; the fate of that family rests in the hands and heart of the elder son. It's his choice. Forgiveness or schadenfreude. His own pride or reconciliation. His vision of justice or the God-like justice of the Father.

My friends, today we worship God - who is like that father of these two boys. Jesus tells this story to remind us that God's justice is different from ours. He tells this story to point out that our idea of justice — who should get what in response to their actions – is different from God's justice.

This story humbles me with the realization that I can't be the one to determine who God should love, welcome and embrace with forgiveness and acceptance. Is it the same

for you?

This is no schadenfreude in God over any of our failures, losses or mistakes. There is never any haughty smirk on God's face as God watches you. God will never say to you "I told you so."

The justice of God's way is sometimes hard for us to accept when we hold fast to our own ways of justice. But thanks be to God that God's way, God's justice and God's grace is so much bigger than ours. Apparently, God will give anything, include his Son to bring us home and embrace us and throw a lavish party in honor of us. Isn't that grand!