

“The Good Father and His Two Lost Sons” + Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

4th Sunday in Lent + March 27, 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

The well-known and well-loved parable before us this morning is usually called “The Lost Son” or “The Prodigal Son.” However, as we shall see, it would be better to call it “The Forgiving Father,” or, as one scholar calls it “The Good Father and His Two Lost Sons.” Here we see that God’s costly grace is offered to all: whether it be in the manner of His undeserved love to those like the younger son, or in the matter of His undeserved love to those like the older son. Let’s take them one at a time.

— I —

First, the younger brother: “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them” (vv.11-12). Imagine: a son who wishes his father were dead so that he could get his inheritance right away! Even worse than his greed is his totally ungrateful heart for all that the father has done for him, and a complete rejection of the father and all that he stands for. He wants to get away from this wonderful man. He is tired of living under Dad’s authority; he wants to far away and do things his own way.

What would you expect the father to do? In that culture you would expect the father to smack his son across the mouth and put him in his place. And yet, the father will not force him to stay. He does not want to keep him against his will. His love for his son is so great that he is willing to endure the agony of rejected love. With a heavy heart the father turns over the appropriate portion of his assets to the son—this ungrateful punk. What does the son do with his new-found wealth? He turned the whole of his share into cash and leaves town. No doubt by now the whole village has heard of this tragic course of events in the house of the father and there are not many left who respect the son. “Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living” (vv.13). The father had worked his whole life to gather that money, and in a very short time it is gone. Here was a son who did not wish to live within bounds. He followed the desires of his sinful, human heart, spending

the family fortune on his sinful pleasures. What shame he brought on his family!

We know who Jesus is talking about in the parable: he is talking about the tax collectors and [public] sinners who drew near to hear Jesus—the ones whom Jesus received kindly and with whom he shared meals. They were the scum of the earth: cheating other people, betraying their fellow countrymen, following the lusts and desires of their heart. How despicable!

But wait! If we hear the parable only in such a way as to condemn other people, then it has missed its mark with us! Jesus would have each one of us see ourselves as the lost son. The father later says that this son of his was dead at this point in time. Even while he was still in the home of his father, his rejection of the father shows that he was dead to the family. The same was true of us as we were born: “You were dead in your trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). Our natural condition spiritually is that we are all stillborn. We are unable to help ourselves get to God and can do nothing to save ourselves; He had to raise us from the dead. “But, Pastor,” you may be saying, “We have been raised to life in our Baptism. This is the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit. How can you say that we should think of ourselves as the son who was lost? That is very insulting!”

True, we have been raised to life in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism. But we still have that old sinful nature in us, the Old Adam, that ugly monster, who every day wants to turn us away from the life our heavenly Father has given us. We have been raised to life in Christ, but are we living in that life that God gave us, or have we thrown it away? Why is it that in many ways our lives resemble the younger son?

Think of all the good things that God has given us! He has given us a mind and heart that are to love Him above all things, but the truth be told, we would often just as soon not have a heavenly Father to whom we are accountable! We would just as soon like to do things our own way without having to worry about what God says. Part of us doesn't want to hang around the house of God if our Father is going to have so many rules by which to live. He has given us lips to bless His name and sing His praises, but we gripe and complain instead. He has given us wealth with which to care for our families, serve our neighbor, and extend His kingdom, but instead we have been all too ready to spend it on our selfish desires. He has planted in man and woman

tremendous desires and an attraction designed to create a wonderful intimacy between husband and wife, and we have let those desires degenerate into lust and other sins. He has given us His saving word, but where is our desire to hear and learn that sacred word?

Where does this kind of life lead? “And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything” (vv.14-16). This is where sin leads! All the tempting promises from the devil, the father of lies, are unfulfilled. The younger son’s squandering of the family fortune did not bring him any lasting happiness or true joy; instead he is dragged down to the level of a beast--even below the level of the pigs, since he feels like they are eating better than he. Considering that pigs were unclean according to Jewish law, what could have been more disgraceful? Now he wishes he were a pig! There is no true happiness apart from our heavenly Father—that is especially seen in hell, where stubborn sinners will spend eternity apart from the blessings of their heavenly Father--they will get exactly what they wanted: a life apart from Him.

Jesus was criticized for not taking sin seriously, but the way He tells the Parable, He is very emphatic at how low the young man has sunk!

As low as he has sunk with his aching belly, the younger son comes up with a plan to get something to eat: “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise 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 as one of Your hired servants’”” (vv.17-19). Some have supposed that Jesus is describing genuine repentance. But a closer look shows that what the younger son is really doing here is concocting scheme by which he is going to earn his way back into his father’s good graces. He proposes that he could be hired by his father and, since the father pays a good wage, he could eventually pay off what he had lost and then perhaps over time earn back his place. After practicing the speech he will make to his dad and thinking about how the negotiating will proceed, he starts back toward home.

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and

kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son’” (vv.20-21). One of the key details here is that the father saw him “while he was still a long way off.” In other words, the son was still lost when the father came out to get him. The son is like that lost sheep trembling on the mountain; he is brought back home by the father. Laying aside all pride and dignity, the father runs down the road like a fool to go after his dear son. When he finally reaches the boy he throws his arms around him in a loving embrace and kisses him. What could be a more dramatic testimony to the father’s love for his son, and the complete forgiveness in his heart? And remember, all this is done publicly. There are people around to watch this—nothing is done in secret in these villages. He wants everyone to see how he feels about this son!

Here we can surely see the saving action of God through His Son Jesus. All this time that the son was gone, the father has been watching for him. God has had His eye on us sinners with a longing heart ever since our first parents rebelled.

The father did not remain up at the house but came down running through the streets for his son. God did not remain aloof when the world fell into sin, but immediately made a promise and set in motion a plan by which God Himself, in the person of His Son, would take on human flesh and come to rescue His lost children.

The father was restored to his son only at a very high cost. He sets aside any thought about the large share of his estate that has been lost through the irresponsible actions of this rascal. He forgets about what others in the village might say about him and his foolishness. Even so God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ only by paying the highest price ever paid: the life of His eternal Son was sacrificed in order to set us free. His resurrection from the dead signals to all the world that this sacrifice has been accepted.

Instantly the son is restored! Indeed, the father has already pardoned the son before he ever shows up! The father has been waiting for him so he can show his love. There is no groveling required, no period of probation, no stern looks or words of reprimand—only a hug and a kiss. This is how reconciliation with God works: it was actually accomplished for the whole world before we were even born, when Jesus died for the sins of the world and rose again from the dead. All that is left for us is to accept this gift from God by faith.

Does this son accept this gift? Yes! Finally, he drops his plan to earn his way back into the Father's favor. There are no negotiations. He simply says the truth about his sin and lets the Father receive him back, not as a hired hand, but as a son! He is the lost sheep who has allowed himself to be found and to be carried back to the fold.

And there is more! "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet'" (v.22). It is as though the father says to all who will listen: "This young man in tattered and dirty clothes is my son! I will not have him looking so shabby. Get him one of my own robes to wear." The ring on his hand may very well have been the signet ring. A signet ring has a pattern in it unique to the family. When business was conducted and documents needed to be signed and sealed, the ring was pressed into the wax to make it official. Such a signet ring would allow the son to once again conduct business in the name of the father. It was like giving him access to the credit card! What of the shoes? Only slaves went barefoot; the father will have none of that for his dear son. And the father adds: "Bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to celebrate" (vv.23-24). To kill a sheep for a celebration was a big deal, but to kill a fatted calf was stupendous! It may very well have fed two hundred people! The father wants to invite everybody in the family, his business associates, neighbors in the village. He wants all to know that this son has been restored! Friends, this is the lavish grace that God has toward us. This is what God has in His heart toward us. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Our repentance does not make His forgiveness happen; forgiveness is already a done deal. It is waiting to be applied to each of us by faith. We are the eternally lost who were found. We are the dead who have been made alive. We are the slaves set free to be sons and daughters of the king. We are dirty from the pigsty of our sin but daily washed by the blood of Christ and clothed in His robe of righteousness. We are the object of the joy in heaven because we are sinners whom God has rescued from eternal death.

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What about the older brother? He, too, is in need of grace. His sin was that in his self-righteousness he was jealous of the attention given to the

younger brother. (Notice that he doesn't even call him "brother," but simply says to the father: "this son of yours.") He, like the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled at Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and other public sinners, thought he had been blameless: "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command" (v.29). He even charges the father with being stingy with him: "You never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends" (v.29). Because of his own stubbornness, self-righteousness, and pride, he is going to miss out on the celebration! His own heart was empty of the grace that filled the heart of the father.

Here, too, we must see ourselves! Doesn't it happen that we sometimes grumble about all the attention in the church and the energy and resources spent on trying to reach the lost? Have we ever wondered why the church needs to be reaching out to people in the community instead of just taking care of our own? Have we ever questioned the need to send people to foreign nations when we have plenty of work here in the United States? If we have ever thought that way, then we are breathing the air of the big brother; we are not operating with the kind of heart that our heavenly Father has.

But the Father had lavish grace for him, also. Gently but with determination, the same father who had run to meet the younger brother now goes out and pleads with the older brother. He begs him to come into the party and join the celebration. The father answers all the son's objections: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (vv.31-32).

Did the older brother come in and join the celebration? Jesus does not finish the story. He puts that in the lap of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus is gently and thoughtfully pleading with them to come on in and rejoice over these sinners who drew near to Jesus to listen to Him. This gathering celebrates and sings glory to the Forgiving Father, who has a place for them as well—and for you and me. May God help us, as redeemed sinners, to sing for joy over the Father who forgives both those who go their own way and squander His good gifts with shameful acts and those who in wicked self-righteousness think themselves better than others. In Jesus' name. Amen.