

March 27, 2022  
Fourth Sunday of Lent  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

This parable of the prodigal son is a favorite of Christians as well it should be. This story is crazy loaded with Gospel good news! And unlike some of Jesus' parables, at first glance this one is pretty easy to unpack and understand.

We have no trouble doing with this story what we always want to do with parables; find our place in it. We know we are sinners so obviously we're the sinner in the story, the prodigal son. And God our loving and forgiving Father in heaven is obviously the loving and forgiving father in the parable. So yes, the Gospel in this story abounds.

The nature of this father really takes center stage. Right off the bat he is generously giving to a ridiculous degree. This younger son is an impudent twerp asking for his inheritance while dad is still alive. What he deserves is a whack upside the head, but instead the father blesses him and acquiesces to his request.

Then, after the son parties his way into pigsty poverty and returns home asking for a job, the father is loving and generous to a fault. He doesn't wait for the son to come to the house but excitedly and joyfully runs out to meet him on the road. He doesn't give him a job as a laborer, but restores him as a son. He holds no grudge against his impudence, but instead throws a lavish banquet to celebrate this son's return.

Good news indeed! Despite our impudence, our rebelliousness, our insistence on taking all of God's gifts to sinful places, the Father is filled with joy when we repent, mourn our sinful ways and return to Him. God not only fully forgives our many sins, but ultimately seats us at the banquet feast in His kingdom forever.

It's a wonderful, simple parable. This is how we teach it to children in Sunday school. A scene from the Luther movie I show to confirmation classes actually has Martin Luther teaching it this way to a group of children. And every bit of this understanding of the story is absolutely true. God our Father is gracious, giving and forgiving, removing our sins from His memory as far as the east is from the west by the cross and empty tomb of Christ.

Yet...that's not the point of the parable. Note the introduction the lectionary inserts to frame the context: *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"*

This parable is aimed at the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about Jesus hanging with the sinners. So the point isn't about the prodigal son, it's about the older, faithful son. *"But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, '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.'"*

This parable leaves the hearers hanging, wondering if the older brother would heed his father's words, forgive, and enter the banquet or if he would stand in righteous anger, forever outside of the celebration. And that is the point. And that point calls on each one of us to place ourselves in the parable not as the prodigal, but as the other brother.

This may be difficult to do, at first. We look around our family and friends and sure, there may be some squabbling and nastiness sometimes, but in the end we love them and would rejoice if they were found after being lost. Even looking at our church family and community in general we probably don't find the kind of animosity this older brother has for the younger. But slow down and look more carefully at this guy.

What's his opinion of himself? It's pretty high. He cites how for years and years he has done the right thing by his father. He laments that he has never received the feast he thinks he deserves by right. He looks upon the sins of his younger brother in disgust, as if his acts have permanently doomed him to a lesser standing.

And let's not forget what happened at the top of the story; the father divided the inheritance between them. Whatever is left now belongs to the older son. But if the younger is received back as a son, fully back into the family, what does that mean for the older? Sacrifice! His inheritance is diminished. To acknowledge the return of his brother as a brother means it's going to cost him. He must give of what's he considers his if he is going to walk through the door and join the celebration.

Now think about yourself in his shoes. Are there nasty, sinful folks who you would just assume not come through those doors? People of a certain race, people of a certain socio-economic standing, prostitutes, junkies, that special jerk in your life who stands out big in your mind when I say "that special jerk in your life"? Would you sacrifice your time, your dime, your emotional investment to have them received into God's house? If they did come, would you accept them as your equal as a child of God...even if they struggled in the heinous sins they bring with them?

I know I may sound like a broken record here but remember that the scribes and Pharisees are the “good church people” of Jesus’ day. We are church people of today. As such we run the same risks of pride, division and standing in judgment of others; traits St. Paul warns Christians about often. We should honestly consider where in our lives we may be this older son. Do you look at other people and say “I behave better, I believe better, my morality is better, my piety is better” with the end result being “I deserve better”? If you found out Jesus loves that other just as much as He loves you, would that strike you as somehow unjust? And I don’t think any of us should be too quick to say “no”, because let’s face it, there are some pretty awful people in this world.

And if and when you find someplace where you are that older brother, where you stand apart in anger detesting a particular sinner for whom Christ died to gain forgiveness, remember what the father is really saying to the older son; “Get over yourself and join the party!” That’s basically it.

One way Holy Scripture defines the kingdom of God is the wedding banquet that is filled with guests who don’t deserve to be there but were invited anyway! This parable depicts the brother standing outside of this wonderful party because he counts himself above, beyond, and more deserving than the sinners inside the banquet! You don’t want to be that guy and you don’t have to be!

The Father is right here, right now begging you to release that holier-than-thou attitude, repent of your lack of love, and join the party. So every day, do that. Remember that, yes, you are the prodigal, and yes, you are the older arrogant brother, and repent of all of that, because Jesus died and rose that all of the Father’s children be welcomed to the party.

Amen.