

March 30, 2025
Fourth Sunday in Lent

“Standing in the Wrong Place”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

When it comes to Psalms, it is the 23rd one that everyone knows. When it comes to Bible verses, it's John 3:16. When it comes to parables it's this one, the parable of the prodigal son. And while most everybody knows it, you'll get differing ideas about what the point is. For a pastor that's good, because I get to preach on it many different ways because there are many divine truths in evidence here.

Some put the focus on the younger son, sin and repentance, and how you are never so far gone that you can't return and be received back into the grace of God. Many put the focus on the Father and how the steadfast love and forgiveness of God never ceases, no matter how heinous the offense. The meaning of the lesser images of the inheritance, the famine, the far-off land with its pigs, and the sumptuous banquet can be bandied about in all sorts of devotional and spiritual ways. But if you look closely, you can't really miss that Jesus is squarely aiming this parable not at any of those, but at the older brother.

There is a reason the lectionary committee chose to include those few verses at the beginning of the chapter. It is in reaction to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about Jesus dining with tax collectors and sinners that Jesus tells these parables. He tells two parables about the nature of God, Himself, and how He seeks the lost and is overjoyed when they are found. Then he tells this third one before us today which culminates in the son refusing to join in such a celebration.

So let's look at this older brother. Other than the fact he exists, he isn't even mentioned until the full story of the younger, lost and found brother has taken place. We find him out in the field, presumably working as a good son should. But what's his reaction to the good news? Anger! There is no joy at the lost one being found, only resentment, thinking that the one never lost should be treated better. Thus this angered son refuses to enter the banquet.

The father, as is his nature, comes out to greet this older son, somewhat similar to the way he did the returning lost son, and urges him to enter, to come home.

“Look, these many years I have served you...” is how the older son responds, and this reveals a lot. He doesn't speak as a son loving and honoring a father, but as a hireling, a servant toiling under an overlord who is due just compensation. He continues, proclaiming his loyal service to dad but then says, *“But when this son of yours came...”* He no longer considers the wayward son his brother—he is too much of a vile lowlife and deserves to be more than shunned—he is banished from the family according to this guy.

So the father explains how the son misunderstands. It is right to celebrate, *“...for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”* It is not about service and reward. It is about love and family, grace and forgiveness.

And Jesus ends the parable there...hanging. Will the older son relent of his anger, forgive his brother, rejoice and join the banquet? Or will he stand angry, outside of the feast and the loving grace of the father? I think Jesus does this purposefully, leaving the Pharisees and scribes to ponder their next move—stand apart in judgment over tax collectors and sinners, or rejoice that they have come to repentance by the presence of Jesus in their lives. It's more than a parable; it's an invitation to repent.

Unlike a lot of the other ways folks understand the themes of this parable, this older-son based look is a tougher one to bring into our modern 21st century context. I mean, we're repentant believers trusting in Jesus, not Pharisees opposed to Him.

But the standing-apart-in-judgment part, maybe we do need to take a look at that. Are there divisions in our small congregation? Is there anyone you count yourself a step above as a Christian? If one of our members who only shows up for service once in a blue moon walks through the doors, is it joy because they've returned, or haughty grumbling "It's about time"? Is there someone who has left our fellowship that you would just assume stay gone? Tough questions.

Out in the world is there in you genuine loving concern about those you meet who seem obviously outside the kingdom of Christ? Or are you good with it, maybe kind of smug about your good, Christian faith compared to their total lack? Are there folks in your life that, if they were to walk through the doors of this church to confess their sins at this altar, you'd leave, horrified at their presence because he or she is such a horrible lowlife sinner? Tough question.

Myself, I wondered if some flamboyant, blue-haired, transgender man...or woman...it gets confusing, came into my orbit demanding I use "we/us" pronouns and spouting some off-the-rails theology of Zen-cranberrism, would I react with any compassion at all? Would it even occur to me to somehow seek that they be led to the kingdom of God through my words and actions? Or would I just consider them a whack job deserving a good knock upside the head and write them off?

My point is not to accuse you, but maybe just remind all of us that according to our self-centered fallen nature, we can find ourselves somehow in the older brother's shoes, standing apart resenting some other person as lesser, underserving of mercy, grace and forgiveness. In that we are always a hypocrite because we too, are completely undeserving of mercy, grace and forgiveness and certainly lesser than Holy God.

To be this way, comfortably, is a dangerous, dangerous thing. The older brother is willfully standing in the wrong place—outside of the banquet—yet thinking himself in the right. If we're so full of ourselves that we would forgo compassion and forgiveness for another, we stand apart from compassion and forgiveness altogether!

This parable was an invitation to the Pharisees and scribes to see themselves standing apart from God's compassion in their own judgmental self-righteousness, repent of that, and join in the compassion and forgiveness that is Jesus Christ, true God, breaking into human history for its salvation.

Likewise this parable is a good Gospel invitation to each one of us to examine ourselves, and to release any lack of compassion or forgiveness we might have against a group or even a single person who seems beneath our contempt...a sinner, a real sinner, perhaps one who has done you a great wrong. Why? Because Jesus seeks the lost that they may be found—and none of us deserves such perfect love. But Jesus gives it anyway.

The overall point of this parable is that there is no bottom to God's grace and compassion. He wants to find and save the lost. This is the mission of Christ and the reason for His cross. Maybe you can see yourself as the prodigal in the parable. Maybe you even can see yourself as the obstinate older brother in the parable. Ultimately what is important is that you see God's compassion in Christ in the parable, and receive it as your own to forgive you and welcome you into the Father's feast, and to then share with others in love, even the tax collectors and sinners like you.

Amen.