

THE FORGIVING FATHER

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

March 31, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 15, first reading verses 1 through 3, and then verses 11 through 32. It is on page 740 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 15, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable:

And we'll skip over the first two parables Jesus spoke to get to the third.

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." ' ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.' ²² 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. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is

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mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“The Parable of the Prodigal Son” might be the most well-known and popular of Jesus’ parables. That’s because, on the surface, it teaches us that any sinner can repent and be accepted by God. No matter how great your sin may be, you can repent and be accepted by God. On the surface, that’s what this parable teaches.

Now I promise to not ruin that, because that is the simple and primary point of the parable. But I also want to scratch beneath the surface, because there is much more to be seen. When we scratch beneath the surface, we find that the prodigal son might actually be worse than thought, which means the love of the father is deeper, richer, and stronger than we could ever imagine. We will also learn something about community and the nature of repentance. There is really a lot here.

The popular title of this passage is “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” The word *prodigal* means “wasteful or extravagant.” It refers to the manner in which the younger son wasted his inheritance. But I don’t think it’s a very good title, because the parable is about so much more than just one rebellious son. Some have suggested, “The Parable of the Two Lost Sons” (Lenski), which is a better, because it captures the problem of both sons. Another suggestion is, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son, His Elder Brother, and Their Loving Father” (Just). This title is accurate, but a bit wordy. So I would prefer something like, “The Parable of the Forgiving Father,” since the father is really the main character. You could also call him “The Loving Father,” “The Gracious Father,” or even, “The Prodigal Father” (Keller) since the father is even more extravagant than his rebellious son.

I suppose the reason for all the different titles is that there is just so much going on. The primary point is that no matter how bad a sinner you may be, God is always willing to forgive. But we also want to scratch beneath the surface.

As with everything in the Bible, we want to notice the context. Jesus tells this parable as the climax in a set of three parables. All of them have to do with God finding what is lost and the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (15:7, 10).

There were two very different groups present when Jesus told these parables. The first group was the tax collectors and sinners. The younger son represents them. Jesus was accepting these sinners, as well as eating with them. And the eating was the big thing. Table fellowship was extremely significant to the Jews. It meant friendship and acceptance. It was like welcoming someone as an honorary member of your family. So for Jesus to eat with tax collectors and sinners was to welcome them into his family, which meant, of course, the family of God.

The other group was the Pharisees and scribes. The older brother represents them. They were not happy about Jesus welcoming these sinners. They thought it was inappropriate for Jesus to associate with them. *First, they must amend their ways*, or so they thought. The real problem is that the Pharisees and scribes were jealous of the attention Jesus gave to these sinners. We see this in the way Jesus paints the older brother. He’s jealous of the feast the father gives to celebrate the younger son’s repentance.

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So these are the two groups present: the tax collectors and sinners on one side, and the Pharisees and scribes on the other. Both sides hear this parable. And Jesus says enough to offend both parties. But he also calls both sides to repentance.

So let's walk through this parable together.

It starts with the younger son asking for his inheritance. Now this is more than just asking for a big pile of money. First, he's not really asking for it; he demands it. **"Give me the share of property that is coming to me"** (15:12). This is incredibly greedy, but it is also extremely insulting. He wants his inheritance early. In effect, the younger son is saying, "I wish you were dead already." After the father's death was when the inheritance would be divided. But the younger son is sick of waiting for his father to die, so he asks for it now.

Now remember the order of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments can be divided into two tables. Commandments one through three summarize how we should love God. This is the first table. And commandments four through ten summarize how we should love our neighbors. This is the second table. And the first commandment in the second table is this: "Honor your father and your mother." It even comes before, "You shall not murder." To a Jewish audience, dishonoring one's father is just as disgraceful, if not more so, than murder.

Now put yourself in the shoes of the tax collectors and sinners. This is the way Jesus decides to characterize your sin. That's not very nice. *You guys have been acting like you want your father to die.* You can see how someone might take offense to that. But it seems that they don't take any offense to it, because they already know how bad their sin is.

Now, in the face of this dishonor, the father comes across as either foolish or gracious—maybe both. He grants his younger son's request.

And here's something I hadn't noticed before: The father didn't just give the younger son his inheritance. He gave both sons their inheritance. Jesus says, **"And he divided his property between them"** (15:12). And, assuming the father did this in the typical Jewish fashion, he would have given a double portion to the older son. That means the older son got two-thirds of the property, while the younger son got one third. This makes it all the more ridiculous, toward the end of the parable, when the older son says to his father, **"You never even gave me a goat"** (15:29). The older son got his inheritance early too.

Now within a few days of this, the younger son gathered up his money and left. This means he had to sell off his share of the land. And in the process of doing so, all the neighbors would have learned what he did. He had to find a buyer for his property. So his sin is no longer just a family matter. It's a community matter. Everyone knows what he did. His reputation in this community is ruined forever.

So he leaves town and settles in a distant country. After what he did, he certainly can't stick around. Then he squanders everything he had until he is flat-broke (15:13). The older brother assumes he spent it all on prostitutes (15:30), but he really had no way of knowing this, and there's nothing else in the text to support this accusation. All we know is that he was reckless with the money until it was gone. His sin was the way he treated his father.

Then, to add insult to injury, the only work he can find is to feed pigs, but he can't even afford to eat as well as these pigs. This detail is especially shameful to a Jewish audience, because pigs were unclean according to the Old Testament food laws. Again, if the tax collectors and sinners didn't already know how bad their condition was, it would have been quite insulting to be characterized this way.

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Then the prodigal son has an epiphany. He has become nothing but a hired servant, but in his experience of watching his father, he knows that his father treats his hired servants much better than he is being treated. So he can either die of hunger in this foreign land, or he can swallow his pride, crawl back to his father, and beg to be a servant. So he decides to go home.

This moment has often been identified as the younger son's repentance, but that's not quite right. At best, we could call this the first part of repentance. He acknowledges his sin, but he does not yet recognize the extent of the father's mercy. He has contrition, but he still has no faith. He wants to make a deal with his father. He has a plan, and he practices his speech: **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of you hired servants."** (15:19).

And I wonder how many times, as he's walking home, he practices this speech in his head. He has plenty of time to go over it. I suppose He would have pictured the setting, perhaps standing at the entrance to his father's property. He would have practiced his tone. He would have thought about his posture before his father. He would have thought about how to answer all the questions his father must have for him.

But none of it mattered. **"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him"** (15:20). And this would have been kind of funny. Imagine some guy, who is at least a few years past middle-aged, running down a dirt road in a tunic. And he had to run a fair distance too.

The son does his best to get his speech in. Remember, he wanted to make a deal with his father: **"Treat me as one of your hired servants."** But he never gets to that part. The father interrupts him, not with questions about where he's been or what he's done, but with instructions for his servants to bring the best robe, a ring, shoes for his feet, and the fattened calf (15:22-23). These are all signs of what the father declares: **"This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found"** (15:24). The words, **"My son,"** must have been the sweetest words the prodigal had ever heard. He acknowledges that he is unworthy to be called his father's son. He wants to be a servant, but the father will have none of it. *No deal! You are not my servant! You are my son!*

And notice where the father does this. It's not in the privacy of their own home. They are still a long way off. They're standing in the middle of the road somewhere. People can see them. And he asks the servants to bring him the best robe, a ring, shoes, and even the fattened calf. He's going to parade his son home in honor. Remember, the whole community knew about his sin, and now the whole community is going to know that the son who was lost has been restored in full as a son.

The father throws a party to celebrate. He kills the fattened calf. This is a big deal. You don't kill the fattened calf for a family dinner. You're going to need the community to help you eat this.

In all of these details we see the extravagant grace of the father. He's been dishonored, cheated, and abused by his son. The younger son's sin amounted to extreme hatred toward the father. But the father's compassion for his son never changed.

So when the father sees the son, he supplies what is necessary to restore the son. The father was sinned against, but he provides the robe, the ring, the shoes, and the fattened calf to be sacrificed. To put it one way, the forgiving father pays the price for the prodigal son's sin.

I hope you see the parallel to Jesus Christ. Against God we have sinned. But how does God restore us? Not by us making atonement, not by us working it off as slaves, but by Christ making atonement. God donates himself. He pays for our restoration. It is Christ's blood that is spilt. It is

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Christ's righteousness we are clothed with. Can we make a deal with God to work our way back into his good graces? No. And God will have none of it. Christ has been sacrificed. That is enough, so rest in that. God will not have it any other way. He doesn't want servants. He wants children. This is repentance: not that we turn our lives around, but that God restores us to a right standing before him.

Then the parable turns toward the older brother. He comes back from the field and notices there's a party going on. And notice the geography. The older son is not "a long ways off," like the younger son was when the father saw him. He is near. It's like standing in the driveway while the house is rockin'. He's close enough that he could just go in and see what's going on. But he asks one of the servants instead. Perhaps he is already suspicious. And, sure enough, the party is for his younger brother. *Dad killed the fattened calf and threw a party for that disgrace of a son.* So the older son is mad. He refuses to go in. He refuses to be happy that his brother is alive. His dad has to come out and plead with him. He reminds him that all he has is really his. But they had to celebrate, because his son is alive. For all they knew he was dead. Even if he was still alive somewhere, he was dead to them. The way things went when he left, they never expected to see him again. They had to celebrate, and the father had to make a big deal of this to show the entire community that the prodigal son is restored.

But the older son is angry. And remember, this isn't a long way off. They're right outside. All the party guests can see them. Even if they can't hear the conversation, they will know exactly how it goes when the older son either comes inside or walks away. If he comes inside, then everything is good. The family is whole. But if he walks away, not only is the family broken, but the roles are reversed. If he walks away, he dishonors his father, just as the younger son did at the beginning, and the whole community will see it. So what's it going to be? Are you going to join the party, or will you commit the same sin you hate your brother for?

What does the older brother do? We don't know. And that's kind of the point. Remember, Jesus tells this parable, mostly for the sake of the Pharisees and scribes. By now they have figured out they are the older brother. So Jesus leaves this question before them: *What will you do with these sinners who have come home? Will you rejoice with me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? Will you now turn away and dishonor God?*

"God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). To be a member of God's family means that we share his desires, so we rejoice over every lost sinner who is found. It means we celebrate each dead soul that comes to life. Maybe it doesn't seem fair if you think you've been faithful to God your entire life, but we don't make people earn what Jesus has already paid for.

Jesus calls all sinners everywhere to repent. And he comes out to you. To the openly sinful, he runs to you and clothes you with the best he has, which he purchased by his blood. He calls you his own. He wants the whole world to know it. You are his, and he loves you. And to the secretly sinful—to the self-righteous—he comes out to you, and he tells you that all he has is yours. Your righteousness is not your own; it has been given you as a gift. He has given all you need. So come and rejoice. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.