

THE FORGIVING FATHER AND THE TWO LOST SONS

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

March 27, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 15, verses 1 through 3, and then verses 11 through 32. Jesus tells a parable about two sons who seem very different, but really aren't. 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: ...

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

THE FORGIVING FATHER AND THE TWO LOST SONS (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)

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.

Jesus “**came to seek and to save the lost**” (19:10). So who are the lost? Who did Jesus come to seek and to save? Who are the lost? Because Jesus did not come to save those who never got lost in the first place. He came only for the lost.

This is a major theme in *The Gospel of Luke*. I suppose it’s a theme in all of the gospels, but especially in Luke. He pays a little more attention to emphasizing this point. Scholars call it the “Great Reversal.” The poor become rich, while the rich become poor. The lost are found, while those who seem to be found are really lost. The sick become well, while those who seem well are really sick. The wicked are justified, while those who seem to be righteous are condemned. Jesus turns everything backward, upside down, and inside out.

The “Great Reversal” comes through in all four of the gospels, but Luke has a few passages that are just his own. For example, we see the “Great Reversal” in the Magnificat. That’s Mary’s song in chapter 1. She says,

“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty” (1:52-53).

In chapter 5, Jesus says, “**Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.**” (5:31-32). Luke is also the only gospel to tell the story of Zacchaeus, the wee-little tax collector who wanted to see Jesus. And Jesus wanted to see him too. This is in chapter 19. Jesus goes to Zacchaeus’ house, and at the end of the story, Jesus says, “**The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost**” (19:10). And Luke is the only gospel to tell the story of the thief on the cross, who comes to repentance while he is being executed for his crimes. Jesus says to him, “**Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise**” (23:43). And in chapter 15, where we are today, Luke has the three lost and found parables. We skipped over the first two and just read the last one. But they fit together as a unit. Jesus told them all in succession, so we don’t want to ignore the first two. And the first two help us understand the point of the third.

In the first parable, a man with a hundred sheep loses one. So he leaves the ninety-nine and goes searching for the one lost sheep (15:3-7). The second parable is about a woman with ten coins. She loses one, so she diligently cleans her house until she finds it (15:8-10).

Jesus told these parables in order to justify his ministry, especially his friendliness toward sinners. “The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled [about him], saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’ ” (15:2). So these parables show that Jesus is not excusing their sin. Rather, he’s searching for them and calling them to repentance. He wants to bring them back under his gracious care, and heaven rejoices over every sinner who repents. So Jesus uses these parables to justify his ministry and illustrate what he’s doing with these sinners.

It’s important that Jesus adds a third parable after those two short parables. Because, if all we have are those two short parables about the sheep and the coin, the Pharisees and scribes would get the impression that they’re okay. They’re the ninety-nine sheep who are perfectly fine in the

THE FORGIVING FATHER AND THE TWO LOST SONS (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)

field. Or they're the nine coins that didn't get lost. So Jesus adds a third parable, in which the older son has just as much of a problem as the younger son, if not more.

It's often called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." But I think that's a bad name for it. The Bible doesn't usually give titles to the parables. The headings and titles are added by the translators. The word *prodigal* means "wasteful or extravagant." So it's accurate in so far as the younger son really is wasteful and extravagant. But when we see it as the third parable in a set of parables about lost things, we should recognize that it's about a lost son. And it's not just one son who is lost, but there are really two lost sons. So it's probably better to call it "The Parable of the Two Lost Sons." But the sons are only supporting characters. The main character is the father, so I think he deserves a place in the title. It's kind of funny that with most parables, the main character, who typically represents God, doesn't even get a mention in the titles we give to the parables. That doesn't seem quite right. So I'll suggest this title to you: "The Parable of the Forgiving Father and the Two Lost Sons."

It's a marvelous story. It's beautiful from the first time you hear it. But, as is the case with the best stories, when you hear it again, and when you meditate on it, it really opens up even more. At first it's just a beautiful story about a rebellious son that everyone thought was gone forever, perhaps even dead. But then he comes home, and there's a big party. When we meditate on that first part of the story, we start to realize that the truly marvelous part is the extravagant grace of the father. And the first part of the parable is so beautiful that we might get lost in it and forget the second part. But when we start to look at the second part some more, and when we remember that Jesus told these three parables in order to justify his friendship with sinners, we begin to see that Jesus was really telling this parable against the Pharisees and scribes. It's a rebuke, revealing that they are really the lost ones. But the most recent way that this parable has opened up in my eyes is to see that Jesus wasn't really telling it *against* the Pharisees and scribes, but that he was telling it *for* them. He was still in the process of searching for their lost souls. He's like the forgiving father who goes out to them and gently and graciously calls them back to repentance.

So let's look at it closer and see how it opens up to us.

The younger son, quite honestly, is really, really terrible. He demands, "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me" (15:12). He gets it, and a few days later, he leaves. This is really insulting. The property he asks for is, of course, his inheritance. It's what he was going to get when his father died. So, in effect, the younger son is saying, "I'm tired of waiting for you to die. Just give me the money now, and I can be done with you." That is truly horrible.

If anyone thinks that Jesus is "light on sin," this would be a good correction. He is forgiving, but he is not light on sin. Remember those sinners that he is being friendly toward? The younger son represents them. This is how Jesus characterizes his new friends. They're horrible people. Jesus knows that. He doesn't pretend that they're good. They're bad, and he calls them bad. Yet, he also forgives them.

The younger son is a giant fool, so he blows through the money recklessly, he finds himself flat-broke, and he can't get a decent job. So he comes up with a plan. And this is a tail-between-your-legs survival plan. He's going to need to eat some serious crow for the rest of his life, not just with his father, but also with his brother and the entire community. When you do what he did, it's not a secret around town. Word gets around. Everybody back home knows what he did. And if he goes home, he'll have to wear that shame for the rest of his life. But it's his only

option. It's shame or death. So he has this plan. And this is one of those critical details: he does not intend to go home as a son. He doesn't even think that is on the table. His hope, and this might even seem like a longshot, is for his father to accept him as a servant. He's blown his chance as a son. That's gone. But maybe his dad will take him back as a servant.

Well, his return does not go according to plan. His father's compassion is just too great. The father saw him from a great distance. And this little detail shows that he was waiting for him to return. He was longing for him to come home. He was watching that road. When he saw him, he felt compassion. And he ran to him. This is another significant detail. Dignified old men did not run in the ancient world. Imagine this old man, holding up the hem of his tunic, and just booking it down this road like the family dog. He hugs his son and kisses him. The son starts his speech, but he doesn't finish it. I don't know exactly why. He confesses his sin before God and before his father. But he doesn't get to his plan about being a servant. Maybe he realizes already that his father won't have it, or maybe his father cuts him off before he gets to that part. Either way, it's clear the father would hate that plan. He has urgent instructions for his servants. Bring a robe, **"the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet"** (15:22). And do it quickly! He just showed them the meaning of haste, they'd better be running too.

Now what's the point of all this clothing? It's to honor his son. It's to show that he is not a servant, but he is a son. And it's important to do it out here, on the road, still a long way off. When he actually returns home, he will return with his father, dressed as a son, in front of everyone. This is a parade, and the point of the parade is to take away his shame.

And when they get home, they're going to have a feast. That's what the fattened calf is for. This isn't going to be a quiet family dinner. This is going to be a community celebration. Again, the father is taking away his son's shame. He says, **"Let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found"** (15:24).

The one word that stands above all the others in this parable, at least my mind, is the word **"son."** The younger son has seen his father's compassion and felt his embrace, but hearing this word seals the deal. He had confessed, **"I am no longer worthy to be called your son"** (15:21). So what does the father do? What does he call him? **"My son."** There it is. That is a pure absolution. That is complete restoration and complete reconciliation. There's nothing to be done, nothing to be paid. It's pure, and free, and complete. And this is the love of Jesus for every sinner who repents.

So they go home, **"And they began to celebrate"** (15:24). The father restores his son, he parades him in front of all the neighbors, and then he makes them celebrate it. He will not allow his son to wear the shame that he deserves. Perhaps someone will look upon the father in shame for accepting his son back in such an undignified manner. But he will not permit anyone to look upon his son in shame.

And all of this has a cost. This is expensive clothing and an expensive party. But that's the cost of restoring his son. And the father is thrilled to pay it.

This whole parable, of course, is about Jesus receiving sinners. We might think that the father in the parable represents God the Father, the first person of the Trinity. But it doesn't, at least not directly. The father in the parable is actually Jesus. And through Jesus, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit also receive sinners. So it is about God the Father, but it is through Jesus. The point person is Jesus. He's the point of contact with us. He's the one who ran out of heaven to receive sinners. By eating with them and associating with them, he's taking away their shame. Jesus is treating them like children of God. And, most importantly, Jesus pays the price for their reconciliation. He wears their shame as his own. Jesus pays for our forgiveness with his own

THE FORGIVING FATHER AND THE TWO LOST SONS (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)

precious blood. The cross is the payment of reconciliation. It's not our good works. It's not our good resolve. God will not accept a deal in which we become his servants. He refuses any kind of deal where we earn something. He insists on receiving us as his beloved children. Even if we have insulted him by the way we live, and even if we once wanted nothing to do with him, the only kind of reconciliation that Jesus will accept is to receive us as his children with no merit from us. Those are Jesus' terms, and he will not have it any other way.

Now this seems unfair, especially to those noble older sons of God who never profaned his name or squandered the good gifts he gave to them. The older brother, when he learns what's going on in his house, refuses to go in. How could his father disgrace himself with this younger son? Why would he throw a party for that son of his? The older son won't even refer to the younger son as his brother.

This second part of the parable is really the reason Jesus told the parable in the first place. It's because the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about him and how he graciously received sinners and ate with them. So when we get to the second part of the parable, it begins to look like Jesus is telling this parable against the Pharisees and scribes. And, in a way, he is. Jesus compares their attitude of superiority to a brother who can't even be happy that his younger brother isn't dead. So Jesus characterizes their sin in a harsh way. But he did that with the sinners and the younger brother too. More than anything, Jesus is calling these Pharisees and scribes to repentance. He is *for* them.

We actually see several parallels between the younger son and the older son. The father goes out to both of them, to the younger son when he's coming home, and to the older son when he refuses to come home. Both sons think of themselves as servants. The younger son's plan was to ask to be a servant. The older son already thought of himself that way. He says, "**Look, these many years I have served you**" (15:29). But the father will not regard them as servants. Here, to the older son, he says, "**Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours**" (15:31). Jesus is not really against the Pharisees and scribes.

And you might see more of yourself in the older brother than you do the younger brother. Jesus intends for all of us to see ourselves in one or even both of these sons. And maybe instead of being the rebellious child, you're the self-righteous child. You keep all the rules, at least when you think your Father is watching. And you're better than the rebellious child. And you know you're better than him. And maybe you also know that you're not supposed to say that out loud, but you still know it. And that's bad. But, you know what? Jesus is not against you. He came out of heaven for you too. He calls you, "**Son.**" Everything he has is yours. But it's not because you have served him all these years. He gives it to you as a gift. You were lost. He has found you. He calls you his child. Amen.

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