

BE RECONCILED TO GOD

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

March 30, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 15. We'll start with verses 1 through 3, in order to get the context for who Jesus is speaking to. Then we'll pick it up again at verse 11 and read through verse 32. 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

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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 gracious call of God to all people is the same: be reconciled to God. This comes from the epistle lesson, which we read from 2 Corinthians 5. Paul makes clear that this is God’s gracious call to *all* people, because he says, “In Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19). So Paul implored all people, not only the Jews, but all nations, and not only the Corinthians, whom he wrote to on this occasion, but all people. He implored all people to be reconciled to God. And he explains the reason why in what has to be one of the most profound verses in the entire Bible, 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” The one who became sin is, of course, Jesus Christ. God the Father made his son, Jesus Christ, to become sin. This explains the atonement in a profound and shocking way.

Jesus took your sins as his own. At the cross, where he was crucified to death just outside Jerusalem, he paid for your sins. So we have something of a legal transaction here. In more than one place, our sins are described as a debt against God. And, for justice to be restored, that debt must be paid. So we can think of Jesus’ sacrifice as paying off that debt. That is a true and accurate way of describing the atonement, but it only captures part of the picture. And if we understand this concept wrongly, we might think of Jesus’ atonement as merely a legal fiction, as if God knows we’re really not righteous, and we really don’t deserve his favor, but he just kind of pretends that we are righteous. But that falls short of the truth.

The way Paul describes it here, God did not just pretend that Jesus was guilty of our sin. He did not merely credit our sins to Jesus’ account in a transactional kind of way. What he says is much more profound and real. “For our sake [God] made him to *be* sin.” And I struggle to explain that in any other way, except to simply emphasize the word “be.” God did not simply pretend your sin really belonged to Jesus. It really did belong to Jesus. And it’s even more than that. It did not just belong to him like something laid around his neck, but he actually came to be that sin. On that Good Friday, Jesus was sin. It’s similar to what Peter says in his first letter, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24). In some mysterious way, sin became incarnate in the flesh of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

So what does this mean? What does this do? It means that when Jesus died, God did not merely pretend that sin was gone. But if Jesus became sin, if all the sin of the world was in him, and he was that sin, and then he died, then sin really is removed, not for pretend, but for real. Your sin, every harsh word, every lustful thought, every selfish action, every rebellious feeling, and every other thing contrary to the Word and will of God died with Christ and in Christ. He became sin. Then he died. This means that sin died. Your sin died in him. Therefore, Paul implores us and declares to us, “Be reconciled to God.” There is no barrier to reconciliation anymore, for God has turned his gracious face to you.

The Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 12 describes this in a similarly profound way. Isaiah prophesies,

“You will say in that day:

‘I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
that you might comfort me’” (Is. 12:1).

“That day,” by the way, is the day when the Christ came. If you look back to the beginning of chapter 11, that’s where Isaiah prophesies of a branch coming forth from the stump of Jesse, who was the father of King David. So it speaks of a new king coming to Israel from the broken and forgotten line of kings. And that king was Jesus Christ. So Isaiah prophesied that when the Christ came, we would give thanks to God, because his anger turned away from us.

And it’s interesting that the Hebrew word for “turned away” is the word we often translate as “repent.” God’s anger *repented* or *turned away*. We might think of repentance as something we do. That is, if we turn away from our sins, then we will be reconciled to God. But it’s more the other way around. We are reconciled to God, because his anger has turned away. I don’t mean that he repented of his anger in the sense that he realized he was wrong to be angry. God’s anger is always justified. But his anger turns away from us, because the Christ came and made atonement for sins. When sin was put to death in Christ, God’s anger turned away, and we are reconciled to God. So Isaiah goes on,

“Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation” (Is. 12:2).

This reconciliation is the power behind Jesus’ parable in the Gospel lesson. Sin is removed, God’s anger turns away, and he turns his gracious face to his lost and rebellious children.

Typically called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” this is certainly one of, if not the most beloved of all Jesus’ parables. So it might feel very familiar. It’s even familiar enough that in secular culture, the word “prodigal” is used to describe someone who was absent for a while and then returns. But that’s not even what the word “prodigal” means. It means “wasteful” or “extravagant.” It became part of the title of this parable because of the younger son’s wasteful spending. But when we really consider the parable, it’s the father who comes across as truly extravagant or, as the older brother sees it, wasteful. The late pastor Tim Keller wrote a fantastic little book called *The Prodigal God*, where, based on the extravagance of the father in this parable, he describes the extravagant and excessive grace of God toward sinners whom he loves.

So this parable might be familiar, but, like a great work of art, you can look at it for a while and eventually see something new. Or even if it’s the same, it has the power to be fresh again. And, truly, this parable is a great work of art.

At first, we might identify more with the younger son. As young Christians, our sins may be fresh in our minds. And we can, and should be overcome by the surprising grace of God that he would turn again to be gracious toward us. But as we live long enough to become the villain, we might start to see something of ourselves in the older son. And I would suggest that if we have been children of God for some time, we should examine our hearts to see if that prideful attitude may dwell in us.

This parable has two very distinct audiences. That’s what we learn from the first three verses. Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus. Jesus received them as friends and ate with them. In ancient Israel, table fellowship was an expression of friendly intimacy. You did not

eat with someone unless you shared a bond with them. So the Pharisees and scribes were scandalized by this. Pharisees and scribes were overlapping groups. Many Pharisees were scribes, many scribes were Pharisees. They were teachers of the Law, including the Old Testament scriptures. They thought it unbecoming of a rabbi for Jesus to associate with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were despised by Jews, because they collected taxes for the occupying government of the Roman Empire. And “sinners” refers to those whose sins were known to the community. It could be thieves or liars. It almost certainly included adulterers.

So these are the two audiences. Jesus tells this parable *for* the tax collectors and sinners, to reveal he is merciful and gracious to them. So it might seem that he tells this parable *against* the Pharisees and scribes, kind of in the sense of, *shame on you for despising your younger brother*. But Jesus is not against them, even though they are against him. Rather, he is also calling them to be reconciled to God. Jesus tells it for both kinds of sinners.

The younger son, at the beginning of the parable, is truly the worst. He’s a bratty rich kid, who despises his father, the source of his wealth. He asks for his inheritance, which is essentially to say to his father, “I wish you were dead already.” Then he leaves. He doesn’t want anything to do with his father, his brother, or whoever else is at home. **“He squandered his property in reckless living”** (15:13). What does that mean? It could be anything from fancy clothing to prostitutes. He ends up broke, and the only work he can get is feeding pigs, which would have sounded especially shameful to Jews.

And notice at this point that this is how Jesus describes the sins of those tax collectors and sinners. It’s not exactly flattering. He’s not defending them. He’s defending his forgiveness of them. And the tax collectors and sinners don’t seem to mind the comparison. They know what they are.

So the younger son comes to his senses, sort of. He remembers that his father’s hired servants were well paid. If he had to be a servant, his father was the best master he could think of. So he goes back home, rehearsing 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 your hired servants”** (15:18-19). We might think of this as the younger sons’ moment of repentance, but that’s not quite right. He has contrition over his sin, which is good, but he does not yet have faith in his father’s mercy. He doesn’t want to be a son again, he wants to make a deal with his father to be a servant. He wants a relationship based on works.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion” (15:20). The son was still lost. He hadn’t come home yet. Perhaps he wouldn’t even go through with it. He might feel shame and go away again. **“He was still a long way off.”** So the picture we get of the father is that he was watching, even searching for his son, much like the protagonists in the two parables we skipped over (13:4-10). And the father ran. This was undignified for a master in ancient Israel, but he did not care, just like the true God does not care about his dignity. And it was a long distance to run. So the son walks with shame, while the father runs with compassion. He hugged him and kissed his son.

Then the son starts his speech that he had rehearsed. This is one of the most significant details of the parable. He recites the entire speech word for word, except for the last line. He confesses his sin, but he does not say, **“Treat me as one of your hired servants.”** That line is left out. Why? Perhaps the son is overcome by his father’s compassion. Perhaps the father interrupts him before he can present his deal. Either way, the father will have none of it. He refuses to have a relationship with his son that is based on his son’s work. And so it is with you. Jesus refuses to

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have a relationship with you that is based on your works. It can only be based on his compassion and his sacrifice for you.

So the father immediately clothes his son. He sends for the best robe, a ring, and shoes. And he does this before they get home. The neighbors will see the son coming home, and the father wants to make it clear to everyone that his son is completely reconciled to him. This illustrates the way Jesus paraded his friendship with tax collectors and sinners before all to see it. He receives them and eats with them. And this is illustrated by the feast the father throws. Jesus did not merely eat with tax collectors and sinners in this world, but he will feast with us in the new creation.

All of this angers the older son. At this point, he becomes the son who despises his father. He complains that he had faithfully served his father for many years, but his father never gave him even a young goat (15:29). He, in a way that is ironically similar to his younger brother, wanted a relationship based on his work. The great tragedy is that he never recognized that the father wanted a relationship based on grace. So the father says, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (15:31). And we recall, when the father gave the younger son his inheritance, that he divided his property between them (15:12). At that point, the older son received his inheritance. There was nothing, not a single thing that belonged to the father, that did not also belong to the older son. But the older son wanted to work for it. And in this way, he also despised his father. So in a way that is ironically similar to the younger son, the father also goes out to the older son to reconcile him. And he invites the older son to come and celebrate.

And it just ends there. We don’t know what the older brother does. The Pharisees and scribes will write the ending. Will they celebrate the reconciliation of tax collectors and sinners to God? Or will they despise Jesus for his mercy and go their own way?

In this way, Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes to repentance. He does not tell the parable against them, but for them, that they too would be reconciled to him and enjoy a relationship of grace.

So also, for us, this parable is a gracious invitation to reconciliation with God. It’s a call to both kinds of sinners: the unrighteous as well as those who consider themselves to be righteous. Jesus calls us to be reconciled to him, not on the basis of our works, but on the basis of his sacrifice for us. “Be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Amen.

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