

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Text: Luke 15:1-3,11-32 (NIV)

¹Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them...”¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.



¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Theme: A Father’s Heart

This parable has been called the parable of the “Lost Son” or the “Prodigal Son.” We often look at the parable from the perspective of the two sons because they correspond to us. But when you think of it, this is not a parable about the sons. It is a parable of the father, and his father’s heart.

I. Both sons very precious to the father.

This chapter has three parables about things that were lost. The first parable is about a lost sheep. One of the sheep has run off. Jesus says of the shepherd, “*Does he not leave the 99 in the open*

country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?” The answer is, “Of course, he goes after the sheep!” The second parable is about a lost coin. A woman loses a coin that is worth a day’s wages. Again Jesus says, “*Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?*” Again the answer is, “Of course she does!”

If you lose something valuable, you look for it. The more precious it is to you, the more time that you spend looking for it. Think of the things that you lose. Some of them you spend a little time looking for, but they are not very valuable or they don’t mean much to you, so you quickly give up. But some things you search for frantically, and you just won’t give up.

A sheep or a coin each have some value, but now Jesus gives us a whole new perspective when He tells the parable about a son. What if one of your children were to run off? What if they were to tell you that they wished that you were dead? What if you knew that they were ruining their lives? What if they were destroying your reputation? Would your heart still go out to that child? Jesus doesn’t even have to ask the question in this parable. Of course it would! It would grieve you as much as it grieved the father in this parable. The emotion of a parent with a prodigal child isn’t as much anger as it is sorrow.

II. The father’s heart was grieved when His sons were went astray.

The pharisees and teachers of the law in our text failed to understand that God could have any compassion on sinners. They were grumbling that Jesus was receiving tax collectors and sinners. These were people who were raised in Jewish homes. They had been circumcised, taught the law, and brought to the synagogue. They should have known right from wrong. They should have trusted God. But they ran from God. They ran from their families. They took advantage of people. They took part in the most immoral acts imaginable. The pharisees and teachers of the law said, “Let them get what they deserve.” They would never associate with such a person again. Such people would never be allowed in the Synagogue again. They had no compassion or mercy on people who had wandered from the faith.

It is tempting for us to look at people who have wandered far from our Lord that way— with contempt and anger. We wonder how anyone could have any mercy on them at all. But what if you were the father or mother of that child? Then your thought is not, “Let them run!” “I hope that they never return home!” Your heart goes out to them. You are filled with grief. You long for them to come to their senses and return home.

That is Jesus in our text. He is the Good Shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, the woman who searches for the lost coin, and the fathers whose heart is grieved when his son runs away. He hopes that his love and compassion will be remembered. He wanted the sinners of that time to repent, to turn from their sins to God’s forgiveness, and He longs to every wandering Christian today to return to Him and His forgiving love.

Whenever we wander, He desires for us to come. That is shown most vividly in Peter’s denial, which was our Gospel lesson last Wednesday. In Luke’s account, it says that Jesus looked straight at Peter when he denied his Lord. Last fall I asked a group of students how they thought that Jesus looked at Peter. The first response that I got was, “He was mad!” Jesus wanted to tell him, “I told you so!” I don’t think that this was the case at all. I think that Jesus wanted to cry. His heart was breaking. It

went out to Peter. He longed for Peter to repent and trust in His forgiveness. No matter where we have been, no matter what we have done, our Lord's desire is that we repent, that we turn from our sin and come home to His gracious arms. He loved us so much that He gave His life on the cross to pay for our sins. The price has already been paid. His desire is that we simply come home.

That is also the case when we are unforgiving. The older son didn't have the same heart as the father. His hope was that his younger brother would never come home. If he would have heard that the younger son was coming home, he would have probably met him and told his brother that he is no longer welcome. But the father met his brother, cleaned him up, and threw a lavish feast. When the older brother came home from his work, he was furious, not only had his father received the younger brother back, he celebrated his return.

This applied to the pharisees who felt that they had slaved for God. They gave up so many joys of this life for God. They did everything that God demanded. They thought that their love for God was greater than God's love for them. When sinners repented, there was no way that they could ever receive them again. By doing so, they had now put themselves outside of God's family.

But what is the father's heart toward this older brother? The father leaves the celebration. He comes out to him. He searches for Him, and pleads with him. He tells him that he had to celebrate. His son whose was as good as dead had returned home. All of the people of God were celebrating, why would he want to stay outside? We never know what the end of this parable is. Will they older son come in? Will he stay outside? Would the pharisees continue to grumble that Jesus welcomed sinners or would they repent and rejoice?

It is tempting for us to think that we have slaved for God and that our love for Him is greater than His love for us, but Jesus reminds us in this parable, *"All that I have is yours."* Everything that we have is a gift of God, including our salvation. None of us are perfect. When we refuse to forgive anyone, when we would prefer that they never repent, when we wish that they would just go somewhere else, we are standing on the outside, and our Lord is pleading with us to come in. Our Lord's heart is grieved when we refuse to forgive. He begs us to forgive and join the celebration.

II. The Father's heart is filled with joy when the family is together.

As soon as he saw the prodigal son, he ran out to him and embraced him. He killed the fattened calf and had a party. If the older son comes in and joins the party, that would have been reason for even more celebration. The father would have had his whole family together. Isn't that what every parent wants?

Psalm 133 begins, *"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity."* In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul tells the congregation to reaffirm their love for a man who had committed a great sin and to forgive him. Every one of his letters encourages us to love each other and to live in unity as Christians. Just before He was betrayed Jesus prayed that we would be one as He and the Father are one. (Jn 17) God has created us into one family through Holy Baptism. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. His hope is that we see each other in the same way that He sees us, with kindness, compassion and forgiveness. It gives God the greatest joy when we love each other the way that He has loved us in Christ.

As Christians we are a family. Like all families in this sinful world, there is also a lot of dysfunction in our Christian family. There are times when we wander from what we have learned from God's Word and times when we are jealous and self-righteous. But unlike our earthly families, we have the perfect Heavenly Father, whose heart is full of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Thank God for that Father's heart to us, and may our repentance and forgiveness give Him and our brothers and sisters in Christ great joy.

Amen.

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March 14, 2010*