

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Luke 15:1-3,11-32 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. **2** But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 Then Jesus told them this parable:

11 "There was a man who had two sons. **12** The 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. **14** After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. **16** He 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 servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! **18** I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' **20** So 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. **23** Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

24 For 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. **26** So 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.

29 But 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. **30** But 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. **32** But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

"The Father's Love for Lost Children"

A Heart-Breaking Departure

Jesus paints for us a family scene. But it's not one of those scenes you expect to see hanging on the wall in any museum. Or anyone's family room for that matter. Actually, you probably have more familiarity with this type of family scene than that rare moment when everyone is smiling and looking there best for the split second the camera captures the sweet scene.

This scene opens to sounds of shouts. Stomping around. Doors slamming. Angry yelling. Quiet exasperated sighs. The younger boy is at it again. Only this time the brat has upped

his game. This isn't any garden variety tantrum. He's finally gotten up enough nerve to say what's really on his mind. "I wish you were dead!" he screams at his dad. Not those words exactly. But that's what his dad hears. What he actually says is: **"Father, give me my share of the estate."** (Luke 15:12) Without getting into all the legal details, the boy's share of the estate should come to him when his father dies.

What he's really after is a life free from his dad's interference. He wants freedom. He doesn't want any guidance or control or anyone looking over his shoulder. And just to make sure there isn't any doubt about what he's thinking, the younger son makes it clear. As soon as he gets what he's after, **"the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living."** (Luke 15:13) He makes a clear break from his family. Now that he has what he wants from the old man, he makes no effort to hide his selfish ambitions. He turns his back on his father.

And there stands his dad. Watching him go away. What else could he do? He knows his boy is being as insensitive and insulting as possible. Demanding prematurely what his parents want to give him in good time. He can't force him to stay. Dad knows this won't end well. His boy will get hurt. But the most loving thing he can do is simply to let him go. Let him have his way. Without lectures or lessons first, he has to have the chance to learn for himself. He has to let him go: **"So he divided his property between them."** (Luke 15:12)

A Heartwarming Return

What happens when the son gets what he wants? He finds out the hard way he doesn't really want what he thinks he wants. He squanders his father's wealth, living recklessly. When he runs out, a famine strikes his adopted homeland, making life miserable for someone with no connections. He has no family to fall back on. The friends he thought his lavish lifestyle of wild partying brought him are now nowhere to be seen. Desperate to survive, he latches onto a local farmer. Desperation turns to destitution as this gesture of pity by the farmer isn't enough to keep his belly filled. He craves the slop he dispenses for the swine. His longing for freedom has translated into slavery and misery.

This son is truly lost. His self-destructive behavior has led to despair. He's hit rock bottom. Then it dawns on him. Not just what his father did for him, but what kind of man his father is: generous and gracious. Dad is his only hope. He will just have to swallow his pride, tuck his tail between his legs, and return home. After all, he rationalizes, even the slaves on his father's estate live better than the end result of his chosen life.

That's when it hits him. He comes to grips with what he's done, how he's broken his father's heart. He rehearses his admission of guilt and appeal for leniency: **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."** (Luke 15:18,19) No excuses. No claims of victimization. He's not in this predicament because of circumstances. It's no one else's fault. No one forced him to do what he did. His own heart breaks over the pain he has caused his father. He only hopes that the father who extravagantly indulged this wayward son in allowing him to wander away with the family riches will be even a fraction as generous in accepting him back. So he sets off on the long, humbling trek toward home.

But he never gets the chance to pour out his wounded heart. Before he even gets to the edge of the family property, his father spots him. Before he can come groveling for mercy, his father runs to meet him. Before he gets a chance to offer terms of surrender, his father reinstates him. He never gets a chance to execute his plan for survival: **“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.”** (Luke 15:20) His father has been waiting for him, watching for him, hoping for his return. Anxious for the chance to see him even one more time.

Dad doesn't make any deals. He doesn't want to listen to any bargains. There will be no bartering. The son blurts out his rehearsed admission. But dad doesn't even want to hear how sorry his son is. He just wants his boy back. He won't hear of making him a slave. He doesn't see him as a failure, a rebel, the insensitive jerk that he is. He sees the boy as he has always seen him: his son.

So there is no thought of probation. No lectures. No limits on his access to the family estate. No restrictions on his privileges. He is welcomed as an honored guest. He's given status and power. He's reinstated to the family. Now there's nothing left but to celebrate: **“Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”** (Luke 15:23,24) Mercy. Compassion. Joy fills the heart of the father over the return of his son. Love overflows from the heart of the father for his lost son, now found again.

Hard-Hearted Jealousy

One lost son is found again. But there is another lost son in this story. He's just lost in plain sight.

The older son hears the commotion. He's too busy consumed by his work to give it much thought. Until it becomes impossible to ignore. He won't go up to the house himself to check it out. Instead, he finds a servant who can inform him about what is going on. He gets the report: **“Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”** (Luke 15:27) The servant is dizzy with excitement. He waits for the landowner's older son to share the same joy.

Instead, anger. Righteous indignation rises up inside, unable to be contained. There's no hiding his bitterness, frustration. Hatred. That worthless brother doesn't deserve any of this. He should be tossed aside like a piece of trash just like he trashed his family. He should be taught a lesson just like he put his family through so much pain. Fuming with rage, he refuse to join the festivities.

His father is forced to come out and beg him to join in the celebration. That's when the older boy lets loose. He builds his own case. He's been slaving away for the father all these years. He takes aim at the father's unfairness. Dad never truly appreciated the older boy. He always treated his younger brother better. The “good son” never got any of the rewards he deserved. He can't even bring himself to call the younger boy his brother when he unloads:

“But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” (Luke 15:30) A dagger in the heart of his father.

The father’s heart breaks again. This time because the “good son” is blind to his true condition. The boy is lost in self-deception and self-righteousness. He has fooled himself into thinking his own faithfulness has earned his father’s love. His superior living makes him more worthy of rewards. His father kills the phony adherence to the false law: **“My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”** (Luke 15:31) He’s always enjoyed the status of being the son of a loving and generous father. The blessing comes from the relationship itself. So many good things and benefits come to this older brother from his relationship with his dad.

Loving, Generous Father

Who is this story really about? Remember what prompted Jesus to tell this parable in the first place: **“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.”** (Luke 15:1) Sinners were coming to Jesus. Obvious and blatant sinners were drawn to him. The kind of people whose lives are lived in outright rebellion against God. Whose every impulse and action breaks the heart of the Father in heaven. They try to live life on their own terms. But they just show how truly lost they are.

And so many have no idea what to do when they hit rock bottom. Don’t even realize they are lost. So they have no idea of their hope. They don’t know they have a Father whose heart breaks for them. Who is generous and loving and indulgent toward them to the point where people question his sanity and dismiss any sense of fairness. Sinners need to know their loving Father is their hope. He is searching, waiting, looking for them. Eager to embrace them.

But Jesus tells this parable after this: **“But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”** (Luke 15:2) It helps to remember: **“Then Jesus told them this parable.”** (Luke 15:3) Others are lost because they live life on their own terms. They think they are living on God’s terms. They think it’s godly to do what they can, try their best, offer God their obedience, their faithfulness, their efforts.

And we want to welcome sinners. We want God to embrace the down-and-out, the people who have hit rock bottom. We want God to be forgiving and generous and loving. But then we deserve something special for all those years of showing self-control, refusing to give in and indulge in immoral lifestyles. If those sinners get acceptance and status and celebration from the heavenly Father, then you and I deserve a serious spiritual pat on the back.

But this is really about the father who freely loves and forgives all his lost children. Your Father in heaven doesn't operate according to the way we think the world should work. Your Father doesn't accept payment plans or negotiate the best bargains with sinners. Maybe you learned this parable as The Parable of the Prodigal Son. The dictionary defines prodigal as: "wastefully or recklessly extravagant; lavishly abundant; profuse."¹ That description fits the way the first son wasted his inheritance. But it fits your heavenly Father better. He recklessly forgives the lost. He lavishes his undeserved love abundantly.

This is your family portrait with Jesus at the center of this celebration. Jesus is the way, the only one to grant access to the Father. The Father is unconditional in his forgiveness. He knows the greed and rebelliousness of his children who try to run away and sometimes come crawling back. He knows the pride of those children trapped in self-deception about their own performance and what they think they deserve from God. And your Father loves them all. Loves us all.

Because of Jesus. Your heavenly Father embraces all sinners and welcomes you into his family without strings attached or conditions in fine print. He drapes over you the robe of Christ's righteousness. He embraces you and places on your finger the ring of trust. He considers you part of the family and worthy of responsibility. And just as the father in the story gives his returning son shoes to signify he is part of the family and not a slave, your Father pardons you. He gives you the honor of being his child through faith. He has confidence in you that you will walk worthily as his child from now on. Your heavenly Father is the true prodigal in this story. He recklessly, extravagantly lavishes his love on you. And he celebrates. He celebrates you. Amen.

¹ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/prodigal?s=t>