

Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 10, 2013
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (NIV 84)

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. 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:

Jesus continued: "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 men 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 men.' 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.'"

Dear Friends in Christ:

Our text is among one of the most well known of all of Jesus' parables. It's been the subject of artwork and song. It's been called the "Pearl and crown of all parables" and the "Gospel within the Gospel." The traditional title for this parable is the Prodigal (meaning wasteful or reckless) son. Today it is commonly called the parable of the lost son leading us to ask the question, "Which son was really lost?" In actuality the parable shows us much more about the Father's love than it does about the sins of the sons.

As we examine the context of this parable we see that it one of three parables Jesus told to explain why he "continually welcomed sinners and ate with them." (These three parables have been referred to as the lost parables because they speak of a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son.) His words were directed to the Scribes and Pharisees – the religious elite of Jesus' day. Keeping in mind that a parable is a story Jesus told to teach a spiritual truth, let's take a closer look at this text using the theme:

A Tale of Two Sons Reveals the Father's Love

1. For the son who ran away
2. For the son who stayed at home

The details of this parable are so familiar to us that we don't need to spend a lot of time dwelling on them. Jesus began this parable by saying: **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.**

According to OT law the oldest son would have been entitled to a double inheritance so in this case the youngest son would have received 1/3 of the estate while his brother was entitled to 2/3 of the property. It's easy for us to point out that this young fellow is like so many young people who have little or no respect for their parents, who are impatient and who want it all now. Surely our Lord knows human nature all too well and he's able to incorporate it into his teaching illustrations.

Jesus continued: 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. Again it's pretty easy for us to point out the foolish, immature actions of this rebellious son. No doubt this same scenario has been repeated over and over again down through the ages – perhaps by some of us in our “youthful” days. And typically we would react the way the son in Jesus' parable acts when we find ourselves in trouble of our own making – too proud to admit our sins and failures – we look for our own solutions to our self-created troubles as we desperately try to survive.

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.

What a low-life, we're tempted to say. He has no money to put food on the table. He has no education which would let him hold down a decent job. It's hard not to think – that he got what he deserved, isn't it?

Once again our Lord's words reflect his perfect understanding of human nature – he pictures for us an individual whose life has reached the lowest level – just short of complete despair. It's an accurate picture of the sinner who has forsaken God and who now feels like he's been forsaken by God and everyone else. Have you ever notice that even though we are the ones who've neglected the Lord that we're quick to assume that he's the one who has abandoned us?

It's at this point that Jesus' parable begins to take an unexpected turn -- **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! 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 men.'**

As we hear these words it's tempting, isn't it, to continue our berating of individuals like the one in Jesus' parable. Isn't that just like them – when they've got nowhere else to go to suddenly come crawling back home and maybe even try to interject a little religion into their lives? How can you be sure that they're not just trying to take advantage of the situation and manipulate it for their own purposes?

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.

Well doesn't that just take the cake! Sure you can understand the father's point of view he loves his son and wants the son to love him...but you just wait and see it won't be long and that son will be off to his devices and schemes once more, taking advantage of his father's love.

Have you noticed all the finger pointing we been doing to this point? With all that finger pointing we've really been asking the same question the Pharisees and scribes asked. How can Jesus welcome and eat with sinners? We've become guilty of uncharitable judging and failing to put the best construction on everything. We've refused to offer forgiveness. We've failed to see the Father's love for all and to appreciate it.

The Lord knows that side of human nature too. **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.**

It's easy to relate to the anger this son felt, isn't it? After all he was faithful to his father all the while his brother was being so rebellious. Why even now he was out working in the fields. And what does he hear as he heads home, tired and exhausted – why the sound of the symphony and chorus – music and song and dancing – and he wasn't even invited! And what's the celebrating about – his derelict brother has come home! Who could blame him for not going in – after all, he doesn't want to condone his actions. Someone has to hold him accountable for all of the hurt and pain he caused to his family! Someone's got to stand up for what's right.

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!'

Someone's got to stand up for what's right even if it means rejecting a brother and hurting a father. Jesus' really does know human nature, doesn't he? But Jesus also knows all about the Father's love, too. **'''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.**

Do you see the Father reaching out to his oldest son – in love? Calling him to repent of his sinful judging and uncharitable accusations? Hopefully that's easy for us to see. Unfortunately it appears the Pharisees and Scribes missed the point. They were too busy being proud of the dutiful way in which they observed God's law. They felt they had every right to criticize Jesus for fellowshiping with sinners. And they were not about to join in celebration with Jesus. It's clear that Jesus words were directed against them but they did not see the Father reaching out in love to them.

But now a more important question. Do we see the Father's love reaching out to us – calling on us to set aside our finger pointing and failures to forgive? If not we've missed the main point of Jesus' parable.

It's important for us to see the love the Father extended toward the son who stayed home. Remember how easy it was for us to relate to that older son? Remember how easy it was for us to point the finger at the younger son? Truthfully it's all too easy for us to do the same in real life, isn't it? And it's important for us to realize that Jesus paid for those sins too.

The same love the Father showed to the son who ran away also reached out to the Son who stayed home. With patience and understanding the Father listens to the complaints of the elder son. With tender concern he expresses his continuing love for him. In love the Father reaches out to his oldest Son, calling him to repent and inviting him to join the celebration.

Let's go back over some of the details of this parable again -- this time not looking to accuse someone else or to make excuses for our actions. This time let's look for the Father's love and rejoice that he has love for both of his son's -- the one who ran away and the one who stayed home -- because you and I are either one of those sons or the other. Realistically we can probably see each of the son's actions in our lives.

Although the younger son did not always appreciate the loving father and the care he had shown to him -- that love and care made a lasting impression upon him. That love and care was the motivation for his willingness to confess his unworthiness and to return to his father seeking to be treated as one of his servants. **"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! 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 men.'**

Jesus pictures for us a wonderful confession of sin -- based on the understanding that wages of sin is death and that without the Lord a person has nothing. The son makes no excuses. In deep sorrow he says, "I have sinned." He's willing to plead only for his earthly and his heavenly Father's mercy. He clings to the fact that his father -- again both his earthly father and his heavenly Father are loving and compassionate.

The Father's love invites this confession. And the son is not disappointed just as the tax collectors and sinners were not disappointed when they came confessing their sins to Jesus. Listen again to Jesus' description of the Father's love and picture yourself as the run away son. **"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.**

For Jesus' sake -- our heavenly Father has compassion on all who have rebelled against him. And that includes each of us because each of us have sinned against our heavenly Father and failed to live according to his expectations. In compassion for us our heavenly Father sacrificed his beloved Son, Jesus so that he could welcome us to our heavenly home with his open arms. There we will enjoy the continual celebration and joys of eternal life because of the Father's love.

Listen to the extent of that love as describe by Jesus in his tale of two sons. **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.'**

The Father's actions were a result of his mercy and goodness. God our heavenly Father does not deal with us according to our iniquities as the Psalmist reminds us: (Psalms 130:3-4) **If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? 4) But with you there is forgiveness...**

He offers to us the robes of Christ's righteousness as both Isaiah and the apostle Paul assure us. (Isaiah 61:10) **I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, ...**

(Galatians 3:27) **all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**

He puts the ring of sonship on our fingers. Paul declares: (Galatians 3:26) **You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.** The apostle John exclaimed: (1 John 3:1) **How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!**

He prepares a feast of rejoicing for us as David reminds us: (Psalm 23:5) **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

This feast is the Father's way of celebrating the life which is ours through Christ.

There are two reasons why it is good for us to understand the Father's love for the Son who ran away – 1) so that we will be moved to confess our sins and plead for his mercy if and/or when we run away from the Father and 2) so that we will be willing to share the love of the Father with others who have run away and who seek the Father's forgiveness.

It's clear from this parable that our heavenly Father's love is for all sinners. Sin is certainly offensive to God – but in his mercy God sent his Son to be our Savior. The forgiving love of God is possible only because of the fact that Christ was delivered to death for our offences and raised to life to declare that we are no longer guilty before God.

How wonderful it is that the Holy Spirit works through the word to open our eyes to see our sin and our need for a Savior as that word calls us to repent of our sins and to place our selves at the mercy of our loving Father in heaven.

May we rejoice in that love and forgiveness for ourselves even as we willingly share it with others.
Amen.