

Grace Lutheran Church
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Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2022
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ^{11b}“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

This is a powerful story of homecoming, but not in the way that you may be thinking. Yes, the wayward son, the prodigal, the one who was wastefully extravagant, has returned. But I think we locate ourselves elsewhere in the story, not in the person of the younger son but in the older, in a way that helps us to see that the parable remains unfinished--open-ended—and it is up to us to finish it, each in our own way.

Yes, we could identify with the younger son. We quickly get the impression that he has always been wild and impulsive. And in fact, the demand he makes that his father give him his share of the inheritance is unheard of. Inheritance of course comes to the survivors only on the death of

the person in question. So younger son is essentially declaring that his father is dead to him. Author Kenneth Bailey wrote a book on Luke 15 as seen by middle-eastern peasants. On this topic of the inheritance he summarized some of those conversations like this:

“Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?”

Villagers: “Never!”

“Could anyone make such a request?”

“Impossible!”

“If anyone did, what would happen?”

“His father would beat him, of course!”

“Why?”

“The request means that he wants his father to die.”

Now we could identify with the younger son in how he has become lost to his father. Don't we also claim excessive privilege with the gifts God gives us? Don't we use that privilege to carry these gifts off to a distant country, so to speak, and squander them in a world that does not recognize their true value? In so doing, we are not only saying “no” to God, we are kind of saying, “I wish you were dead. Leave me alone to live my own life.” Eventually, though, we become aware of our spiritual hunger. In fact, we realize we are starving; finally, exhausted and bedraggled, we stumble our way home.

But I think that taking on the character of the younger son only scratches the surface of what the parable is telling us. If stumbling our way home was the main message, Jesus would have ended it right there.

Instead, I think God is calling us to see ourselves as the character who usually gets overlooked-- indeed, who we prefer to overlook—the elder son. For him there is no happy ending, because maybe you noticed there is no ending. The story ends with him standing outside the big party. Does the older son relent and come in? Or does he stubbornly keep his distance?

It's challenging to put ourselves in his shoes because he is not a sympathetic figure. Resentment of the younger son has darkened his heart, probably a longstanding pattern of what he imagined as his father's preferential treatment for the younger son. He had to have been outraged by his brother's demand for his inheritance and even more by the father giving in. Ever since the younger son left, resentment has been festering in his soul. He was the faithful one who stayed behind and labored. It was he who kept the farm going and the family in business. Now here is that good-for-nothing brother coming home, and his father throwing a great banquet featuring no less than the calf that the older son himself has been carefully fattening.

That is the last straw, and his anger boils over in words that are shocking and abusive. All pretense of being a dutiful family member goes up in flames. “Listen!” he yells at his father, spitting out the words. “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this *son of yours* came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Working like a *slave* all these years. This resentment is nothing new--it goes way, way back.

But let's be honest: Doesn't this resonate with deep-seated resentments that we try to hide from others, from God, and even from ourselves? How often do we get sunk, stuck, in petty jealousies, complaining about those who are so much more of what we wish we were--more vigorous, more colorful, more prosperous, more accomplished, more mobile, more athletic, more outgoing, more admired, more loved--while we dress in black and grey, literally or metaphorically, and trudge through our days as slaves to our festering anger?

And when things come to a crisis, at some point as they always will, won't we be tempted to heap much of the same abuse on God's head that the older son levelled at his father? "All these years I have attended worship, given alms, prayed faithfully three times a day. Yet this prodigal, or this miserable tax collector, or this poor sinner lying covered in sores at my gate, is the one you gather into your arms of love? What about me?"

What, indeed? This is where we get to add our concluding sentence to Jesus' parable.

What we absolutely must realize in order to save us from spiritual death is that the father, God our father, God our mother, is always right there with open arms, beckoning us to come to him, to step into his loving embrace, to hear these same words spoken to us as the father spoke to the elder son: "My son, my daughter, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." What do you say, in response?

And really, what this parable also tells us is not just that God waiting patiently for us to return to him. Rather, he hurries out to meet us. Verse 20: "But while [the younger son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." God is so eager to welcome us home that he runs the entire out way to meet us, creaky bones and all -- just as the father also came out to meet the elder son where he was, all locked up in his anger.

Do we trust that this is so? Do we trust in God's mercy? Not just do we believe in it, but do we trust it, meaning, do we allow that trust to govern how we act? Just as in my experience in my wind quintet, trust manifests itself in loving actions. If we trust that God is always waiting eagerly for us to return and gather us to him the warmth of love and forgiveness, this frees us from slavery to works righteousness--the mistaken belief that we have to prove ourselves to be more colorful, or more accomplished, or more athletic--the mistaken belief that we need to earn God's favor. The breakthrough awareness that we already have that in limitless supply makes it possible for us to extend those same arms of mercy to others.

So when you find yourself straitjacketed by resentment, let go of your pride because it is a dead end to your own self-destruction. Let it go, let yourself be enfolded in God's arms of love, hear those words--"all that is mine is yours" -- and finish the story by walking into the great banquet of mercy that is always spread on the table of the living God.

Amen.