

7.28.2024 Trinity 9 (Luke 15:11-32)

Jesus often taught in parables. A parable is a short story that teaches a universal truth by inviting listeners to insert themselves into the parable, to see themselves as one or more of the characters in the story, and so, parables are always very straight-forward. They aren't mystical or magical. Parables don't describe enchanted beanstalks, big, bad, talking wolves, or little pigs that build houses of straw, sticks, or bricks. Instead, parables use real life events, circumstances, and characters that we can all relate to such as rich men and thieves, birds and flowers, lost coins and precious pearls, or as we heard this morning: a father and his two sons.

Our Gospel passage today is known to all of us as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but I don't think Jesus would have given this story that title, because He begins the parable by introducing us to the cast of characters, saying, "*A certain man had two sons...*" What we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son is not just a story about a young, wayward son. According to Jesus, this story is first and foremost about a certain man, a father who has not one, but two sons. As we consider this parable today, I would suggest we disregard the familiar title, because that title may limit our understanding by leading us to focus our attention only on the prodigal. Today, let's simply listen to this story as Jesus presents it to us. A story of a father's perfect love, and the very different way his sons respond to His most gracious gift.

As you know, the Father in this story represents God, and the sons, well they both possess qualities that we can all relate to. Therefore, as Jesus shares this parable He is saying to all of us, "If you want to know what God is like, if you want to know what your life is like, if you want to know what you are like, then listen to this story." Jesus said, "*A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living*" (Luke 15:11-12). And so we begin with the younger son, who approaches his loving father with such a bold request.

I wonder, can you imagine approaching your parents this way? "Mom, Dad, I noticed you're not dead yet, but I'd like my share now." It sounds ridiculous, but if you apply that thought to our lives as children of God, it actually makes

perfect sense. Consider for a moment whose resources you are living on right now. Who has given you everything you have, and how often have you asked God, our Father, for your share? We ask, we receive, and all too often we choose to waste that which He gives so freely.

Now, perhaps the only thing more shocking than the fact that this son has the nerve to ask his father for his portion of the inheritance, is the fact that the father agrees. The father divides his estate, gives the younger everything he asks, and then just lets him leave. As I think about this, it strikes me that there are times when God does the same thing with us. He gives us exactly what we want, to show us that the fulfillment of our self-centered desires will never bring true joy or lasting happiness. Like ignorant children, we spend our days, at times even our Sundays, chasing after what this world has to offer, only to realize that to gain the world is to lose your soul (Matthew 16:26). The prodigal got exactly what he wanted, but in doing so, he lost what he used to have. That was the beginning of his fall, to claim what he felt was his entitlement, and to separate himself from his father. When we rebel against God's perfect will for us He sometimes says, "All right, your will be done." At the end of the day, by selfishly claiming what we believe is ours and separating ourselves from Him, we often bring upon ourselves the most severe form of punishment, and that truth is revealed as the story continues.

Jesus said, *"And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine"* (Luke 15:13-16). And so the younger son has hit rock bottom. It may not sound all that repulsive to us, but for a Jew, to have a job feeding pigs is to no longer be a Jew. This young man was a true son of his loving father, but by claiming what he thought was his and entering into the hell of separation from him, he learned this universal truth that Jesus teaches us in this parable: Sin promises freedom, but only brings slavery. Sin promises success, but only brings failure. Sin promises life, but *"the wages of sin is death"* (John 8:34, Romans 6:23).

Now at this point in the story, Scripture tells us the prodigal son came to his

senses, and said to himself, *“How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants”* (Luke 15:17-19). In this speech the son rehearses there are no demands, no complaining, no blaming his mistakes on someone else, just an honest confession: *“I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son...”* It’s difficult and painful to face the guilt, shame, and terrible effects of our sin – how we’ve hurt those we love and grieved the heart of God (Genesis 6:6), but humble repentance is the road that leads us home. This process of conviction allows the son to gain true perspective, because as he thinks of home, he realizes his father is loving, generous, and that serving him is perfect freedom. He wants to be subject to the authority of his father (even as a hired servant), because now he can see: To selfishly claim our rights is to be lost, and to surrender them is to be found, or as Jesus said, *“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”* (Matthew 10:39).

And now the moment of truth... The prodigal has his speech prepared and it’s time to go home. So he *“arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him...”* (Luke 15:20a). If you’re anything like me, and years of your life are marred with sin and failure, don’t miss the good news found in those words, because truthfully, the only way to see someone when they’re *a great way off* is to be looking for them. In this verse Jesus paints a vivid picture of God, sitting on His front porch day after day wondering, *“Will today be the day that my child returns?”* Day after day it isn’t, but God is the God of hope, so He waits and He watches and He waits and He watches until finally one day He sees His child on the horizon. At that moment Jesus tells us: God ran. The Father *“ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him”* (Luke 15:20b). The son has his speech memorized, but doesn’t get the chance to finish it before the Father says to His servants, *“Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found”* (Luke 15:22-24).

The prodigal's words have moved from the selfish demand, "give me what is mine," to the humble plea, "Father, make me one of your own," and the father does. And so we see that when we stop selfishly claiming what we believe is our own, when we come to our senses and acknowledge the truth that God is loving, generous, and that taking up our cross and serving Him is perfect freedom, it is then that we are truly in His presence, because we're there for the right reasons (not because we feel that we have to be, but because we want to be) and it's then that the party truly begins.

That's the story of God's perfect love for every prodigal son or daughter, and the common title of this parable may lead us to think we can stop there, but Jesus didn't. He finished this parable by telling us about the father's love for the older son, a son that is every bit as lost as the younger once was, though it's perhaps a little more difficult to see, because the older son remained at home, out of trouble, and obeyed the rules, but he was completely self-centered and self-righteous. He considered himself to be the perfect son and based this opinion of himself not on his love for his father, but on his own outward conformity to his father's rules. Remember his words, "*These many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment...*" (Luke 15:29). Outwardly he was obeying his father, but inwardly, he was far from home. He was so focused on his own acts of righteousness and on the sin of his brother, that he was unable to recognize the grace and love and generosity of his father.

His younger brother had been changed, healed, transformed, and restored, but the older brother didn't care. In fact, it's clear that his preference would have been for his brother to stay lost, to never return home. He angrily said to his father, "*But as soon as this thy son was come...*" (Luke 15:30). Did you notice how he refused to even refer to his brother, as his brother. In this exchange of words, the older son shows that he has no real love or respect for his father. His self-righteous adherence to his father's rules has become a kind of idol and a source of self-righteous pride, and this pride has led him to a point in his life where (as crazy as it seems) he actually wants to be judged

by his father - the older son believes that he has earned all that his father has freely given.

As this parable concludes, we see that this story is not primarily about the prodigal or his brother, but is instead a story about God, our Father, and the perfect way He loves His imperfect children. At different times in this story each of these sons completely, even infinitely underestimates the depth of their father's love, and I believe that's the reason Jesus told this story. He knew that we would do likewise. He knew that there would be moments in our lives when we would be like the prodigal. Moments when we would walk away from our Father thinking that we have a better plan for our lives than He does, times when we would sinfully waste what God has so freely given, or when we would feel unworthy to be called His child, and Jesus knew that there would be times in our lives when we would be like the older brother, when we would be proud of ourselves and of all we've done to earn God's love, feeling more worthy and more deserving of it than our neighbor.

Through this parable, through this simple, straight-forward story, Jesus says to every wayward child, to every one of us, "Come home. Your Father has been waiting. His arms are open wide, and all that He has is yours" (Luke 15:31). And my friends forget the fatted calf, because the feast that God has prepared for us when we repent and return to Him is Holy Communion. The Body of His Son given for you. The Blood of our Lord and God shed for you. No one can earn such a priceless gift. Not one of us deserves it. We are not worthy. Yet the steadfast love of God endures forever, and the Father faithfully and continually loves us, not for we've done, but for who we are: beloved sons and daughters of God.