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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday after Trinity

July 3, 2022

Text: Luke 15:11–32

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the most beautiful and powerful stories in the Bible. Some have called it the “gospel within the gospel.” What that means is that this parable is a statement of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe, included in the heart of Luke’s gospel.

The details are very familiar. A man had two sons. The younger son wanted to live life without his father. So he did the unthinkable; he asked his father to give him his inheritance. The scandal behind such a request is that children receive the inheritance only after the parents have died. This younger son was basically saying, “Dad, you’re dead to me. In fact, I wish you were already dead. But since you’re not, let’s skip all the pleasantries. Give me my inheritance now and I’ll be on my way.” It’s an outrageous request.

What’s remarkable is the father grants the request. But take note of vs. 12. It’s so easy to miss what the father did, “And he (i.e., the father) divided his property between *them*.” The father gave the older son his inheritance, roughly two-thirds of the estate, while he gave the younger son his inheritance, about one-third. We mustn’t forget that detail.

The younger son leaves town. He squanders his inheritance with reckless living (vs. 13). That doesn’t mean sinful living necessarily. But just wasteful. His older brother accused his younger brother, in vs. 30, of wasting his inheritance on prostitutes. But it’s not clear to me that the older brother’s evaluation of his sibling can be entirely trusted. More on that later.

After reaching rock bottom, the younger brother decides it would be better to live as a servant in his father’s house than to be a pig herder longing to eat pig

slop. Don't miss the gut-wrenching punch that would have given to any Jewish reader of Luke's gospel. A rich, foolish Jewish boys living among and eating with the pigs! Pigs were considered the pinnacle of unclean foods. Such situation is lower than low.

In a similar way, we mustn't miss the connection this has for everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Sin and disobedience to God has brought us to the depths of degradation. St. Paul says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We humans beings, who were created in God's image to be coregents and rulers over a perfect creation are now subject to eternal wrath, unending shame, and the degradation of sin. No wonder the Paul laments his sinful condition by declaring with words of intense anguish, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). All humanity, including each and every one of us, has become the younger son living among unclean animals having been impoverish by our own willful sin and prideful rebellion against God's love and fellowship.

But then, by God's grace and mercy, the younger son goes home ready to be a servant. All the pride, the youthful arrogance, the foolish ambitions are gone. True enough. But what's even more extraordinary is the father's actions! Shocking! Almost scandalous in themselves. He runs to his long-lost son. Men of consequence and dignity in the ancient world never ran. Never. But here he is throwing aside all caution, all customary expectation, and embraces his long-lost son. Vs. 24 records some of the most impassioned, loving words ever recorded in human literature, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

From that moment forward, the son is restored to his original position in the family. Almost as if he had never left in the first place. And there is rejoicing. The best of the best is present. The fattened calf. The son clothed and adorned with the family ring. It's stunningly beautiful. It's the gospel of new life, forgiveness, and reconciliation within Luke's gospel, the larger narrative of the life and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ. All of us are represented by the younger son. Dead and lost to our heavenly Father. But through Christ Jesus, His perfect life and sacrificial death, we have been sought and found, cleansed and

renewed, and declared to be the beloved sons of our heavenly Father. And heaven celebrates as Luke 15:7, 10 teaches us.

But what are we to make of the older brother? If Jesus had ended his story at vs. 24, “And they began to celebrate” we would leave with a wonderful tale of the power and redemptive grace foundational to Christianity. It would be satisfying.

But it would be incomplete. The older brother stands out as the great warning and admonition that we must heed! Will we rejoice in the restoration and reconciliation of the foolish, debased, but beloved younger son/brother? Do we rejoice that the father, who represents God, runs to embrace the ruined but repentance sinner? Will we join in the celebration accentuated by feasting and rejoicing or remain outside in judgmental superiority? The older brother presents us with the question of do we love the gospel of Christ Jesus. The gospel through which God the Father declares unrighteous, ungodly sinners to be just, holy, pure sons of God. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.

Let’s look at the older brother a bit closer. His part of the story begins in vs. 25–32. The older son was working in the fields when he came home. He heard the merrymaking and celebration. It’s at this point his actions become strange, problematic. This is now his house, his property. Remember earlier I said that according to vs. 12, the father gave the older son his inheritance at the same time as when he gave it to the younger son. The house is all his but he refuses to go in to see what going on. Instead, he calls for a servant who tells him the younger son is back and the father is celebrating with a magnificent feast (vs. 27). He is separated from or outside the household. He’s outside the church not only physically, but spiritually. The truth of the matter is the older son is as dead to the father and the rest of the family as the younger son was at the beginning of the parable. He didn’t run off to a foreign country but he just as well have done so. By refusing to enter the family celebration, the older son is declaring himself outside the family. An outsider looking in. He’s lost. And needs to be found.

Jesus continues with the parable. The father learns that the older son refuses to join the party. Once again, the father must do the unexpected. He seeks out the older son too. Never forget, dear brothers and sisters, God does the seeking, the finding, and the saving. That's the wonder and the joy of our Christian faith. God the Father loves and saves us by giving us His Son, the Lord Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit's ministry of calling sinners back home to the Father through the Gospel, we are saved and born again to be redeemed children of God. It's simply amazing. Praise be to God for His steadfast love and mercy.

Let's continue with the older son, remembering that we faced with the question of how we will respond the message that God saves and loves sinners. Consider what the older brother says to his father in vs. 29–30. You might follow along as I read those verses as I will add some commentary as we go along:

²⁹Look, these many years I have served you (*the Greek says slaved for you*), and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends (*actually the father had already given him the inheritance, the goats and the fattened calves were his already*). ³⁰But when this son of yours came (*he doesn't even claim his brother as brother, nor his father as father*), who has devoured your property with prostitutes (*Jesus never said the younger son was immoral, just reckless; the older son can't explain anything in the kindest way*), you killed the fattened calf for him (*but not for me*)!

The older son is as dead to the father and his younger brother as if he too went off into a foreign land and lived with the pigs. The father continues to appeal to his older son to join the family in celebration. Listen to the extravagant love of the father, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (vs. 31–32). The father loves both prodigal sons.

The question that remains for all of us is will we join the celebration? The story ends with a cliffhanger. We don't know if the older brother repents, embraces his father and his brother, and celebrates with the household of believers.

And so the spotlight of God's Word now shines upon our hearts and minds. Most of you have lived your entire lives within the Christian Church having been baptized as infants. There were ups and downs but the Church has always been part of your life to one degree or another. It's easy for us who have been around a long time and lived good, moral lives to develop a sense of spiritual superiority. "Look, these many years I have served you..." And then, in an unexpected moment, we see the joy and celebration the repentance of a sinner creates in the church. It doesn't need to be a "notorious" sinner like a convicted felon or something like that. Maybe just the guy down the street. Or that man you did business with in the past. Or, the classmate you used to hang out with in school; he knows a little of your past even as you do his. Those people are now Christians! Members of my church? And they are being received as equals with me? Animosity begins to set in. Spiritual pride.

Jesus leaves the parable unfinished so that each of us in our own lives can complete the story. It is true, we are all like the younger prodigal son, lost, dead, but found and loved. But we must finish the story of the older prodigal son. By the mercies of God, let us set aside every form of spiritual superiority and run into the celebration. Eat and drink – yes the Lord's Supper and sermons! – and celebrate. Sing the liturgy and the hymns with gusto. It doesn't matter if you are on pitch or have a good voice. The church isn't a concert but a feast. Join the celebration. King David, that sinful but forgiven man, wrote Psalm 103. May his inspired words be the song of our heart now and for eternity; hear his joy:

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! ²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, ³who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, ⁴who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, ⁵who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

That's the gospel we celebrate. God be praised....

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.