

**On Being Prodigal**  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
Rev. Don J. Best  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Bethel Presbyterian Church  
March 31, 2019

Our gospel reading for this Fourth Sunday in Lent, is Luke, chapter 15, verses 1 through 3, and 11 through 31. Last week, the message was to repent before it was too late. The kingdom of God is coming, and we must all turn from our sinful ways and turn toward God. Our reading this morning is the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son, and at first reading, the message may again be about repentance. But this is more a story about what happens when we repent. Listen to this parable from Luke chapter 15:

Gospel Reading

<sup>15:1</sup> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

<sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable:

<sup>11b</sup> "There was a man who had two sons.

<sup>12</sup> The 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.

<sup>13</sup> A 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.

<sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

<sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

<sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> But 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!

<sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

<sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

<sup>20</sup> So 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.

<sup>21</sup> Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> But 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.

<sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

<sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

<sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

<sup>27</sup> He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

<sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

<sup>29</sup> But 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.

<sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

<sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

<sup>32</sup> But 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 the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### Sermon

*The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary says that this parable, "is a gem." Indeed, it is greatly valued. It is familiar. It is prized by Christians and non-Christians for its life lesson. As a bible story, it ranks right up there with "The Good Samaritan," David and Goliath, and Moses in the Nile. But when they say that it is a gem, it is reference to the many faceted brilliance of a well-cut diamond. There are so many facets to this parable, so many lessons to be learned that one could preach a whole sermon series on these 30 or so verses. Yes, it is a long parable.

In these verses, Jesus tells the story of a father whose younger son demands his inheritance, half of everything the father has, and vanishes to a foreign land. The son went off and "*squandered his property*," forgetting everything he was taught growing up, and eventually loses everything. He loses everything including his identity. When he hits rock bottom, considering eating the scraps he is feeding to the pigs, Jesus says that, "he came to himself." Realizing the circumstance he is in, the son hatches a plan to return

to his father, confess his sins, and ask only for a job as a servant in the father's house.

Meanwhile, it seems that the father never forgets the son, never gives up hope that the son will return, and even spends time watching and waiting for the day when he sees the son coming down the road.

Inevitably, the son does return to the father. Poor, broken, embarrassed, and contrite, the son comes seeking the father's forgiveness, and expecting to be treated as a servant in the father's house. But the father sees the son when he is still a long way down the road and runs to him and embraces him. The father lavishes the son with fine clothes, jewelry, and plans a big "welcome home" party.

I said in the beginning that this was a story about what happens when we repent. The father in the story, is our Father in heaven who waits for us to turn to God, return to the loving relationship with the Father. We are greeted, not with judgment and demands for penance, but with loving arms, generous care, and much celebration, because in the eyes of God, a child "was dead and is alive again; was lost and is found!"

This parable of Jesus is definitely about the grace of God, waiting for all of us who turn away from a life separated from the Lord, renounce sin and return to the loving embrace of our Father in heaven.

But...that is not the end of the story.

The authors of the lectionary included the first three verses of chapter fifteen, before jumping to 11 where the parable begins. Meaning that hearing these verses was important to understanding our reading:

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable."

Jesus tells the parable, about the prodigal son, in response to the criticism of the Scribes and Pharisees. The pious leaders of the church who were upset because Jesus was welcoming and eating with 'sinners.'

Everything we have discussed about this story shows us that Jesus is acting as the father in the story. The incarnate Son of God is welcoming sinners and celebrating their return into the fold. Which of course means that the 'sinners' the leaders are upset about represent the younger son in the story. It all makes sense; nice and tidy, but then there is the older son.

The older son enters the story after the party is well underway. The older son returns from working in the field, only to hear music and celebrating in the house. But instead of going into the house, he asks one of the slaves what is

going on. Hearing that his brother has return, the older son gets angry and refuses to enter the house. When the father comes out to ask his problem, the older son starts to rant about being obedient and working for the father, while his younger brother ran away with the father's money. And all his years of faithfulness were not rewarded with even a small party for him and his friends.

But the father pleads with him: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But 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."

If Jesus tells this parable in answer to the Scribes and Pharisees, then we can safely say that the older brother represents them. The ones who have been faithful to Jewish tradition. The ones who have obeyed the Law of Moses and set themselves above others who have fallen short of that which is expected of the Children of Israel, the chosen ones of God. But it is too easy to say that they are the older son in this story and go our own way "tsk, tsking" at their lack of understanding. Their lack of compassion.

Those of us who have been part of the church all our lives, or many years, faithfully working and serving the church, can have a similar attitude toward anyone who is not part of the church. Or worse, anyone who has left the church or strayed in their path.

The grace of God, the loving arms and welcoming celebration of the Father, is available to everyone who turns to God. But if we, or anyone, tries to stand on the merits of our life in the church. If we try to lift ourselves above others because of all the things that we have done, we can never fully know the joy of grace. We cannot share in the Father's grace if we demand to be dealt with according to what we deserve.

Being part of the fellowship of Christ means receiving and rejoicing with others who do not deserve our forgiveness, or, in our minds, God's grace.

The parable leaves us with the question of whether or not the older brother joined the celebration. Did he go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting and feeling wronged. Perhaps, the parable ends there because that is the decision each of us must make. If we go in, we accept grace as the Father's rule for life in the family of God. If we stay outside, we can never know the full grace of God.

Let us pray: Loving and Gracious God, as sinners you welcome us home, make us ever grateful for your grace. As insiders to the church, we can be judgmental of those outside the church, help us to welcome them and share your grace with all. AMEN.