Fourth Sunday in Lent Sermon

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*Jesus forgives us and welcomes us no matter what we have done*

Our gospel reading this morning opens by telling us that tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to Jesus. In other words, the people that society often reviled, or that social elites thought they were better than, are coming to listen to Jesus and he is not turning them away but preaching to them. Some Pharisees witness this and they respond not with wonder or awe, but instead by complaining that Jesus would bother with these people.

Jesus responds by telling them a series of parables. First, he tells them the parable of the lost sheep, then the parable of the lost coin, and lastly, he tells them the story of the Prodigal Son, but I think this story should really be called the Parable of the Forgiving Father. Let me tell you why.

In the parable a father has two sons. The youngest son comes to the father and demands his share of the inheritance. In ancient Judean culture, like today, sons would not inherit until their father had died. The young son asking for his inheritance while his father is still alive is not just rude but deeply disrespectful. It would be like saying, “I wish you were already dead so I could have my things.” Yet the father gives the son what he asks for and the son promptly goes off and squanders his gift.

After a time, the younger son comes to regret his behavior, he repents, and goes home to seek his father’s forgiveness. He expects at best to be welcomed as a hired servant, but instead his father, who has been looking for him this whole time, sees him coming and runs to greet him, embraces and kisses him.

The son then prepares to confess his wrong doings and beg his father to take him in as a servant, but the son never even gets to finish his statement. The father instead of showing any anger at all orders his servants to bring his best robe, ring, and sandals for his son, and then to kill a fat calf to prepare a celebration feast.

The elder son hears about this and responds with anger towards the father. The elder son complains, “How dare you do this father! Don’t you know how bad your son was, and yet you welcome him home with honor and prepare a celebration feast? What about me!? I have been loyal to you all this time, and you never bothered to hold such a celebration feast for me!”

How does the father respond to his angry elder son? Does he yell back? Does he throw him out for disrespect? No. He simply explains why he is so happy to have his younger son back, and that the elder son will always share in what the father has. In other words the father explains he loves them both.

Parables are stories that Jesus tells to highlight something important. In this story the father is God, the younger son is the sinners, tax collectors, and others that the Pharisees despise, and the elder son is the Pharisees.

Imagine how those tax collectors and sinners must have felt listening to Jesus tell this parable. Imagine how it must have felt to hear that no matter what they have done, no matter how much or how badly they have sinned against God, that God still deeply loves them. Imagine hearing that God is ready to welcome them home to be part of God’s family with no hatred, no resentment, and no holding their mistakes over them.

Imagine how the Pharisees must have heard this parable. How they would hear that of course God loved them, and of course their seeking to lead holy lives obedient to God was important, but that God also deeply loved those whom they despised, and that God desires to forgive and welcome all those who are lost home.

This is a powerful story because it still has deep meaning for us today. We can identify with both the younger son and the elder son. We are all sinners who do things, say things, or refuse to do things and so we hurt God, one another, and ourselves. At those times maybe you have found yourself thinking, “I know God forgives those who repent but God can’t possibly forgive what I have done.”

Yet in this parable Jesus reminds us of the truth that God always forgives those seeking repentance and forgiveness. The problem is that we struggle to forgive ourselves and to trust the gospel of Jesus Christ which proclaims that your sins are forgiven.

We can identify with the Pharisees because at times we think of ourselves more highly that we should. We all have people or groups that we think are beyond God’s forgiveness, love, and reconciliation. Maybe it’s those struggling with addiction, maybe it’s people from the opposite political party as you, maybe its people convicted of a crime, maybe it’s people whose lives do not seem holy to us, maybe it’s people of a different race. We look at them and say to ourselves things like, “They are beyond saving” or “At least I am not like them because I live a holy life” or “I can’t stand that person and therefore God can’t stand them either.”

Yet whenever we are fluctuating between being the younger son or the elder son what is important is God’s reaction. Whether we have committed the gravest of sins or the harshest of judgements God still loves us, and God looks for us to welcome us with forgiveness, mercy, love, and compassion.

Don’t believe me? We have proof that this is what God is like in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God come down from heaven and taking on flesh to be born as one of us. God did this to be with us so we don’t ever need to feel alone, or that God is distant from our world and struggles. Jesus lived his life eating with sinners, casting out demons, healing the sick, preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God, and lovingly forgiving anyone who came to him seeking mercy, love, and restoration to the family of God.

When the time came Jesus willingly went to the cross to die to bring reconciliation and forgiveness to all people from those who were his disciples to those who nailed him to the cross. Yet Jesus did not stay dead but instead rose from dead brining hope and new life to all who believe in him, and proving that even the forces of sin, death, and the devil will not sperate God’s love from us.

What is important about the Parable of the Forgiving Father is not the sons but how the father reacts to them, and God chooses again and again to respond with love and forgiveness because we are loved, we are valued, God desires to welcome us to be family, and so God will never stop looking for us. Amen.