

Sermon Lent 4 2019

March 31st, 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read, the parable of the Prodigal Son.

We can only imagine the details of the life of the younger son in this parable. We have the pieces we do know. We know that he served his father with the ultimate insult. He asked for his share of the stuff that the father would be giving to him when he died, which meant two things for the father. It meant that that son was insulting him by saying that he'd rather his father be dead. Secondly to add additional injury to the insult, the father would have sold all of this stuff—cattle or stored food or the like—and it would have meant less resources for the father while he was still living. That is to say, this would make life for the father that much harder. So, we know there is this part of the life of this younger son.

Then there are the details that say he went out and “**squandered his property in reckless living.**” Of course the older son gives his take on that when he says that this one devoured the father's property “**with prostitutes.**” But it seems that he wasn't necessarily keeping the eighth commandment there and putting the best construction on things. That said, we know that he has a point. It doesn't seem that this younger son was living the life of a boy scout. In any case we don't know just how things went with this life, just how sinful he was, in just what debauchery he partook, but it was reckless.

We also don't know how long it was between when he ran out of money and when he had to go find work. But nonetheless, it happened. And as we look at what we do know, we have understand that this was bad. I say that because of the fact that he ends up going to feed pigs. Now, look at the audience to whom Jesus is telling this parable. It's a group of Jews, right? And how do Jews see pigs? Well, if they keep Kosher, they see pigs as lowly because the Law speaks of them as unclean. And my understanding of that is that there was an association with death. They wallowed in the ground. And yes they would have wallowed in manure in this, which was bad enough, but the ground itself was really the problem. The ground is the place of death, the ground is the place where the dead are buried. And death is unclean. But yet where does this son find himself? Not just with the pigs, but feeding them. In fact, he's not just feeding them, but he wants to eat their food.

Jesus tells us **“And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.”** We don’t know what had brought him to this place exactly, we don’t know how the relationship had been with the father before the son left. Likely it was strained in some way for us to have what we have. Perhaps as the son received nothing from anyone he reflected on a father who had been harsh with him at times, or who had told him that the world wouldn’t give him anything, trying to prepare him for life in reality. Perhaps when things had gotten bad and he started looking for this work he had tinkered with the idea of going back then. But then fears overcame him. How could he go back? The father who had seemed so harsh before would probably hardly receive him. After all, that’s what strictness can engender, right? A fear of rejection. What would that father say? Would it be a lecture on how horrible the son had been? Would it be a punishment? Would it be a casting away from the household in rejection: **“Listen young man, haven’t I given you enough? Get away from me!!”**

We don’t know the thoughts, but we do know that suddenly as that son looked at this food of pigs, as he looked at his circumstances, he realized there was at the least a better way. He realized that all of the reckless living had amounted to nothing, that the rebellion had left him empty and longing to be satisfied. He realized that even though he had screwed up so much, there was one more chance.

Of course, that chance required humility. It required repentance. It required the need to eat a lot of crow and go back to that one that he had so gravely injured and insulted. But he had finally hit that **“rock bottom”** as we so often call it in our day. He’d finally reached that point where he could accept any consequence, knowing he deserved it, but knowing it would be better to dwell as a doorkeeper in the father’s household than to dwell where he was. And so Jesus said the young man pulled it together, **“when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’”**

And so as these circumstance created that humility, and he went. And what do we see with the father? Did he see the son coming and go into his house in anger and shame? No, the exact opposite. In fact, it’s almost like the father is keeping wistful watch for the son to come back. And when he sees him we see that feels compassion for him. I’ve mentioned this before, but it’s that feeling in your guts. He wants to help his son without knowing anything of the story. And he wants this son back so much he can feel it in his guts. We see that this old man went running out to his son. He ran out to him and threw his arms around his son’s neck, and before the son can even finish the

offer to be a servant the father has commanded the servants to clothe his child in the marks of the household; to put on the robe, to put on the signet ring of the authority of the family, to put shoes on his feet. And then there's the feast and the sacrifice.

In fact, as the father speaks to the older son we see just what this means. The justification for this feast is translated **"It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found,"** but the word translated "fitting" could perhaps better say "it was necessary" to celebrate and be glad. This had to happen. The father couldn't receive the son back without this feasting, without this celebration. Why? Because that is the heart of the father. I mentioned this as my theme when I preached on this three years ago, but the father doesn't want more servants, he wants sons.

Of course, neither of the sons had gotten it. I mentioned the possibility of the father being stern, and we see the figures who represent God in these parables described in that way. Like in the parable of the talents, the landowner is described by the one steward of the talents as a hard man. I mentioned last week about how the culture seems to perceive God as hard and unreasonable and the church as needing to mediate that hardness, softening it for the world. But it's in view of that demand of the law of God that we finally see the gospel.

And as I say that we can see the application to us, right? We are those sons. Sometimes we are the older son who wants to demand from God based on our dutiful obedience, on our service to Him. Sometimes we are the younger son who wants to rebel against that authority. And as I say that I want you to meditate on that for a minute. Think about when you have made demands because of this service to God in dutiful obedience. And think about when you have rebelled against that authority. It's happened. Both of these happen to all of us.

And in that moment we are those sons. We are those sons who only think in the perspective of servitude. Think about it. The older son made it clear, he had served the father; **"these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends."** I had served you, Father, and yet you didn't give me anything back!!

And then there's the view of the other son. He didn't want to serve so he left and went away. And when he came back it was because he was ready to serve. But what did they miss? They missed the father for who he was. They missed the father for his personhood; that he was not a means to having food, or wealth, or work. No they missed it that this father was the one whose heart burst in love for them.

Don't miss this care from your Father in Heaven. Don't think that this is just about serving him in willing obedience to get heaven, and eternal life. Likewise don't rebel against Him because you think Him harsh or unyielding. Don't kick against His goads because you think He just wants you to be unhappy doing things that are hard or challenging in the face of a world or culture that longs to be filled with things that void of value. No look at His heart.

Look at how He desires to run to you. How He desires to clothe you. How He has clothed you in the robes of His Son: **“as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ;”** have been clothed in Him. Your robe is not the robe of your sin, not the black of your sin, but the white of His purity. Look at that care for you. Look at how He feeds you. He gives you the feast of the joy of His salvation. He feeds you in the feast not of the sacrifice of the fattened calf, but in Jesus who was sacrificed for your sin and who now comes to you and blesses you with the forgiveness He won on the cross. Look at how the Father **“made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,”** so that in His resurrection you might live. And look at how He does all of this that you can live forever with Him.

Christians, as we live in this famine that is becoming so expansive in our culture today, it's so easy for us to be drawn into thinking things about God that are untrue. It's so easy for us to want to acquiesce to the demands of this culture about God, for us not to stand firm in what is revealed to us in His Word. It's likely going to become increasingly so. I have read things recently that made the point that this is only going to continue to be harder. It's only going to continue to be harder to cling to that Word, even more challenging for our children and our children's children. The only way that we have hope to survive in the midst of it, is to realize that any other path leaves us outside of the feast. Any other path but seeing the Father for who He is and that His Word conveys His love for us, His law curbing us and showing us sin that we might see His Gospel revealing His person, any other path will lead us to seeing Him as a demanding servant master. In that then we'll either sit outside the party and groan about who's there, or we'll sit with so many longing to be filled with things that don't satisfy. But here in this story we see God's heart for us; His love for you. Hear that and know it. Hear that and know Him, that you might delight in His goodness in all things.

We can only imagine the details of the life of the younger son that we call prodigal, but in the end we see and know all we need: the love of the father for him. The love that finds it necessary to feast when we come to Him that He may throw Himself upon our necks and make us His Sons. Amen.