

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Third Sunday after Trinity (2021)

The Joy of Forgiveness

Rev. Toby Byrd

“For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:24, ESV)

Throughout His teaching ministry our Lord Jesus used parables to comfort sinners through an earthly story which gave a heavenly blessing. The parable for our consideration today is no different. It is a story, true to fact and experience, from which you may draw a practical lesson. Yet it hides this comfort from those who have no spiritual insight. Therefore, believers who hear or read a parable with the ears and eyes of faith have unfolded before them the very mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

The Gospel Reading for today is the parable of the Prodigal Son, but it also includes the elder son and their father. This parable is perhaps the most beloved of the parables of Jesus and one of the most cherished passages of Sacred Scripture. Therefore, this morning, let us consider the *Joy of Forgiveness* expressed in this most blessed parable.

Although there are three characters in this parable, it primarily deals with a son who becomes lost. The youngest of two sons, no longer satisfied with daily bread from his father’s table, is hankering to go into the world and taste of its delights, but he doesn’t have enough money to strike out on his own. So, rather than wait for the death of his father to receive his inheritance, he asks for it now. What a shock this must have been for his father. What? Give you your inheritance? Receiving an inheritance has only one meaning, someone has died. So, in so many words, the younger son is asking for his father’s death. Such a request is outrageous in our time, and it was as equally outrageous in first-century Israel. But our Lord Jesus tells us the father, ***“divided his property between them” (Luke 15:12, ESV)*** the younger and elder sons.

The younger son received his inheritance and immediately began to squander it in reckless living. Very quickly he foolishly goes through his inheritance. Finding himself broke, without shelter, and the means to feed himself, he realizes he must find work. But the only work he can find is as a keeper of pigs. Literally, he had sunk into the muck and mire of living with and tending unclean things. Life could get no lower for a Jew than having to tend pigs for a living.

God, through circumstance and the accusations of the Law, has led this young man to realize the depth of his sin, both against his father and against God. Devastated by his sin, the younger son, in penitent prayer, repents of his sin. Like the Centurion who said to Jesus, ***“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” (Matthew 8:8, ESV)***, or like the tax collector who would not look up to heaven but beat his breast saying, ***“God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13, ESV)*** the younger son humbly resolves to return to his father’s house and ask to be taken back, but not as a son, but as a hired hand.

The gracious visitation of God may come in various ways, sometimes, as to the prodigal son, as through pigs and corn husks, sometimes through the loss of a loved one, sometimes by poor health and a hospital stay, sometimes by the voice of a condemning conscience, sometimes by a

restless memory or a broken home or a wayward child. In these ways and many more, God comes near and walks with men. He sits with us through anxious days and stands by our bed through sleepless nights. All this He does that as our faithful Friend He may cause us to stop and think and consider the way in which we are walking.

It is just through this manner, by God's gracious visitation that the prodigal son "***came to himself***" (***Luke 15:17***) and realized his sorry, sinful condition. This was the first hopeful moment for this wastrel's life when he began seriously to consider his ways. Now, with adversity as His brush, the Lord begins to sweep the selfishness and the self-centeredness from the heart of the prodigal son.

O that our young people would stop and think. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth! But should we not all take warning and reflect on our way of living? Note well, it is a God-given privilege and blessing that we can stop and think. Unlike the beast, God gave us the gift of reflection. This is a part of our earthly inheritance. You are the crowning creature of His six days of loving labor, to whom He has given reason and sense in His image so that we may reflect on what is good. St. Paul reminds us to reflect on, "***whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, [and] whatever is commendable.***" He continues, "***if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.***" (***Philippians 4:8, ESV***)

Reflecting in this way every wandering sinner must consider that it is sin which separates him from God. The chief torment of the damned in hell will surely be to know that except for unbelief they would be dwelling with the Father in the mansion prepared by the Lord for those who love Him. Therefore, let every sinner speedily repent of their sin, that which separates them from the Father.

Humility and repentance are the attributes of the sinner who is brought to the knowledge of his sin. Repentance flows from a love of God, thus it is a result of faith. This is why, with good reason, the daily repentance of Christians is called a daily return to Baptism, that place where your heavenly Father made you a child of His and forgave you all our sins.

The prodigal son returns to his father and is received in love, and he is forgiven. Here the father's love is the model of Jesus' love for sinners, it is likened to our heavenly Father who is always ready to receive the returning sinner and wipe out the record of their sins. But the elder son does not share his father's forgiving nature. Driven by pride, he is angered by his brother's return, especially the love and forgiveness showered on him by their father.

But this is the way of the proud and self-righteous, the Gospel offends them. They think that since God is holy and cannot tolerate sin, He will not receive sinners. In fact, they forbid God to receive sinners and are offended when God chooses to love sinners and to forgive them freely by His grace alone. Sadly, the Gospel will always offend such people. Like the elder son, they preach that God will only accept those who have made themselves acceptable. Thus, they teach sinners to seek God by their works.

But the Gospel doesn't tell us what we must do to get God to be gracious. The Gospel tells us that God is gracious and that for Christ's sake, He forgives us, He expresses eternal fellowship with us, loves us, protects us, and cares for us. The Gospel imposes no duty on us. Christ takes all the responsibility. He lives for us. He dies for us. He rises from the dead for us and brings us life and immortality.

Like the prodigal son, Jesus seeks us out. He does not seek out self-righteous sinners who don't think they need His forgiveness. He will be a Savior only of humble, repentant sinners. Thus, the Good Shepherd hears the poor miserable sinner's cry for help and comes to their rescue from their pigsties of sin, carrying them home with Him. Furthermore, His church also seeks out sinners through the gifts He has given her; His Gospel proclaimed through Word and Sacrament ministry, that which sweeps away everything that hinders the precious soul from God's grace and the *Joy of Forgiveness*.

Having returned to his father, the prodigal son confesses, he is no longer worthy to be called his son. Expecting his father to respond with an affirmative answer, that's right you are no longer worthy to be called my son, he hears the opposite as his father says, ***"this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."*** (v. 24) No condemnation, no angry words, no accusations, only joy, joy that his son is alive and has returned home. Joy that calls for celebration, joy that calls for dressing his son in his finest robe, joy that calls for putting a ring on his son's hand and shoes on his feet, joy that calls for feasting and celebration. Such is the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7).

Hearing the father rejoice when finding his son alive, we are reminded of the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, where he wrote, ***"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—"*** (Ephesians 2:1–2, ESV) We are born dead, that is spiritually dead. We are brought into this world dead to God and His Word. So how can one become spiritually alive? Scripture tells us we are made spiritually alive through faith. But now we ask, how does one come to faith? Well obviously, not by our own means, we're dead. But God has a way of changing our condition, He has a way of making us alive. He does this through the gift of faith that we may be made spiritually alive to believe in His Son Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. This gift of faith comes through hearing the Word of the Gospel (Rom. 10:17) and through the blessed waters of Baptism where we are cleansed of our sins, robed in the righteousness of His Son, Jesus Christ, given the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell in our heart, the gift of faith to believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin, and made a child of His through adoption. That is, we are made full inheritors with His beloved Son Jesus. But unlike the prodigal son we do not receive our inheritance until *our* fleshly death, *not* the death of the Father, and that inheritance we receive is life eternal with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit in heaven, where robed in Christ's righteousness, we shall joyously feast at the messianic banquet.

So, yes, there is *Joy of Forgiveness*, joy for the forgiven and joy for the forgiver. How wonderful it would be if ever sinner on earth could know and receive such joy. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.