

"The Forgotten Son"  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

March 31, 2019

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

The parable which Jesus tells in our text for today, commonly called "The Prodigal Son", is one of those parables, like "The Good Samaritan", which is known by everyone, by nominal Christians and even by unbelievers. You'll hear these parables referred to in completely secular situations. People will refer to a particularly helpful person as a "Good Samaritan." People will tease someone who comes home after being gone for a long time by calling him the "The Prodigal Son".

However, there may be things that you don't know or have forgotten about this particular parable. First of all, did you ever learn what the meaning of the word "prodigal" is? Many people think it means "lost" or "long gone" as in, "Hey, the prodigal son finally returns home!" The word actually is an old English word which means "wasteful" or "recklessly extravagant."

Secondly, did you know or did you remember that, in the parable of "The Prodigal Son", there is actually another character in the story? We have the son for whom the story is named and who serves as the villain. We have the father who is kind and good and serves as the hero. There is one more person in the story, another son, an older son. The older son is almost an afterthought to the story it seems. Today, let us take a look at this very familiar story from a very un-familiar vantage point – that of the forgotten son – for we may be more like him than any other character in the story.

The main character in this parable is, of course, the father. We would like to be like this man. He is loving, patient, and forgiving to the younger son who does some pretty awful things. However, this father is also loving, patient, and forgiving to the older son who does not do everything right either. It is easy to see that this father represents God, our Heavenly Father.

We really don't relate well to the father. We have to admit that we are flawed in these areas. While we talk about love and emphasize it, our love goes only so far. While we may love those who love us and are kind to us, we struggle loving those who do bad things to us. Our patience is often tempted and frequently lost by us. And there are some people and some offenses against us that we simply find it too hard to forgive.

The character in this parable who gets most of the attention is the younger son. He is cruel and insulting toward his father. He demands his share of the inheritance at that point in time. Inheritances are normally received after the owner dies. By his action, the younger son is saying, in so many words, "You are worth more to me dead than you are alive." He then is wasteful (prodigal) and sinful in how he goes about using his father's goods in (that is, his inheritance). He lives a wild life, pays off prostitutes, and is completely dedicated to a hedonistic lifestyle. It is easy to see that this younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners who were gathered there, listening to Jesus.

We really can't relate completely to this younger son. While we are not perfect and we do sin. I don't think we are all that much like the younger son. He is a real piece of work in his attitude toward his father and in the sinful lifestyle he chooses to lead. He would be perfect for a revivalist tent meeting where he could give his testimony, tell how rotten he was in life, and how God saved him. I doubt that many of us have such a testimony to offer. We sin, but probably not as spectacularly as he does.

The older son is a guy that we can get behind. As I said before, he seems to enter this story almost as an afterthought. But he really is an important part of the story since this parable is directed, not only to the tax collectors and sinners, but also to the Pharisees and the scribes who happen to overhear it. This son is the good son, the obedient son, the faithful son. He always does his father's will and never lets dad down. The older son represents the religious hierarchy, the Pharisees and the scribes, the so-called "good people."

I think we come across a lot like that older son. We are the religious people, the "old faithful" of this congregation. We come to church every Sunday without fail. We even come to Wednesday evening services in Lent and Advent. We give our money to the church. Like the older son who faithfully works in the fields while never straying from his father's house, we are the ones who serve our Heavenly Father faithfully without straying from the House of the Lord. None of these things are bad. They are very good. But they may lead us to believe, like the older son in the parable believed, that we are somehow better and more deserving of God's gifts than others.

The fact of the matter is that the younger son and the older son in the parable are more like each other than we may think. Both of them want to establish their relationship with their father on the basis of works. When the younger son screws up his life by wasting his inheritance and having nothing to eat, his big idea is to return to his father and asked to be a servant. He feels that he must earn his living now from his father because he is no longer worthy to be his son.

In the same way, the older son, when confronted by his father, wants to credit the existence of his relationship with the father and the good things which he has in that relationship to the fact that he has been a faithful son and worthy of these things. He wants to be rewarded, not as a family member in the family banquet, but because he has been a good employee who should get a bonus in order to have a dinner with his friend.

The same is true among us today. Unfaithful or inactive Christians may come to their senses like the younger son in our story and desire to come back to God. They think the way to do so is by coming back to church, not as an act of worship but as an act of obedience. People can become very "religious" if they think it will get them something. If they just come often enough, then they may think that they will be right with God.

How do faithful members react to such behavior? It may be just like the older son in the story. We remember how faithful we've been; how we have done all the work; how we have served on all the committees and boards. We may not reject such people out right, but we may try to make jokes about "The church is going to collapse

because so-and-so is back in church". We may get very irritated at their presence and become suspicious, even jaded, and wonder, "What do they want now?"

What will happen? Things may become like any ordinary family here on earth. We wonder if dad has a favorite son and complain if we think that we are not the favorite son. Yet the father in our story behaves exactly the same to both the younger son and the older son.

The father is merciful to the younger son and forgives him for insulting him publicly by demanding his inheritance at that point in time and for wasting his resources in maintaining a sinful lifestyle. The father does not wait for his son to come to him or improve himself. Rather, the father lifts up the ends of his robe and runs – yes, runs – out to meet his son. This, too, is humiliating to the father. Old men didn't run back in those days, especially rich old men. The father cut him off as he attempts to give his speech about becoming a servant. Instead he immediately clothes him in fine clothes. He puts a ring on his finger which was symbolic of membership in the family. It was like the family VISA card. He welcomes him to the family feast and begins to celebrate. There is no hesitancy on the part of the father and no probationary period for the son.

This is where we like the story to end "happily ever after." But this is where the older son makes his appearance in the story which we may miss because we are still basking in the emotional moment between the father and the younger son. The father is likewise merciful to his older son. You may think, "For what does he have to be merciful to him? He's the good son." However, according to Jewish custom, the older son has been a public embarrassment to his father. For the older son to stand there and publicly argue with his father was a terrible insult. As the older son, it would've been his responsibility to host and serve the banquet. However, he not only refuses to serve the banquet, he refuses to go in.

Again, out of his great love, the father disregards public custom and ignores insult and goes out to his older sinful son. He forgives him for his faults. He reminds his older son that he is not being wrong here nor has he been unfair to him, the older son. Everything which the father gave to the younger son has been in the possession of the older son all along. He has the fine clothing, the family ring, and everything which the father had. He listens to the older son's complaints about "your son" and pleads with his older son to be loving, patient, and forgiving to "your brother." The father tells him (and uses very tender word "child") that he, the father, the older son, and everyone had no choice but to rejoice and celebrate for the younger son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

God, our Father, is merciful and forgiving to the "younger sons" among us. He does not wait for people to come back to Him. He is always going to them. Through His Word, as it is read, heard, shared, and communicated in any other way, our Father is constantly going out to sinners. Those who hear and, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, are convicted of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, are restored by God, their loving Father. He re-clothes them in their Baptism. He restores them to His family. He kills, not the fatted calf, but His own dear Son, Jesus, and invites them to the feast

where they eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and celebrate their restored relationship and eternal life.

God, our Father also comes to us “older sons” for we are in need of His mercy as well. As religious as we have tried to be and as faithful as we think we are to God and His church, we are sinful, too. We become critical of those who are not as religious as we are. We complain about those who do not work as hard as we do in God’s church. Like the older son in the story, we may feel put off, thinking that God has been shorting us in some way, that he owes us something.

It would be very easy for God to abandon us when we get so whiny or to simply punish us as our sin deserves. But God does not do that. God chooses to show mercy to us as he had to the younger son. As He forgives those who deserve judgment and punishment for their outright sin, He also forgives those who deserve judgment and punishment for their smugness, pride, and self-righteousness. He continues to come to us, granting us forgiveness in His Word. He continues to offer us the great feast of His Son’s body and blood in Holy Communion for the strengthening of our faith. He continues to celebrate, rejoice, and be glad over the repentance and reception of forgiveness by us, His faithful people, as he is over the repentance and reception of forgiveness by those who had abandoned Him. We are not being cheated or deprived of anything. We have exactly what inactive members receive upon their return as we, who have never left, have always enjoyed: God’s love and forgiveness, His encouragement and support, and His promise of eternal life in heaven.

The parable leaves us with one big unanswered question that directly affects us. We know that the younger son returned and was welcomed back into the family. However, did the older son ever go into the party? Did he reconcile with his brother and his father or did he refuse His Father’s gracious invitation and acceptance? Did the Pharisees and scribes ever welcome and accept the tax collectors and sinners? The story is open-ended.

What about us? Do we live in contentment and enjoy all of our Father’s gifts all the time? Do we joyfully welcome back without reservation, without suspicion, and without snide remarks those who have gone astray and return. Do we rejoice as the Shepherd did in finding the lost sheep in the 1<sup>st</sup> parable of this chapter; as the woman who found the lost coin in the 2<sup>nd</sup> parable of this chapter; and as the father who found his lost son in the 3<sup>rd</sup> parable of this chapter?

Although the father and the prodigal son rate top billing in this story, the older son should never be forgotten. We may hiss and boo at the younger son for his audacious sin and rude behavior. We may love and treasure the father for his great mercy and acts of love. But we actually live the life of the older brother as we seek to remain faithful to God and as we seek to live with our younger brothers and sisters in the family. Live with satisfaction in your hearts over God’s great gifts. Live to welcome back all of God’s wandering children. Joined together in Christ, let us live the greatest party there has ever been – the celebration of all God’s people that lasts forever. Amen