

Michael J. Mathey
Lent IV
March 30, 2025
Text: Luke 15:1 – 3 & 11 – 32
Title: The Prodigal Son?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our text for this morning's sermon is the Gospel lesson from Luke 15, which was read just a few minutes ago. It's a familiar parable, and probably one of the most widely-known even among those who don't know much about the Bible. At the very least, they've heard of the title – "The Prodigal Son" – even if they have no idea what that phrase refers to. That alone makes this a good parable to keep in mind when talking with someone about the Christian faith when you're reasonably sure that that person might be a Christian who has lapsed.

But the popular title for this parable isn't really all that accurate. Yes, the title is very fitting for the first son, but there are two other main people involved in this parable. And the title of "Prodigal Son" doesn't refer to them in any way.

In addition to the prodigal son, there is the older son who doesn't leave home, and, of course, there's the father of these two men. The parable is really just as much about the two of them as it is the younger brother. The best reason for this title is probably because out of the two sons, we prefer to see ourselves in the younger one instead of the older one. After all, it's the prodigal son who gets the happy ending in this parable; he gets the warm and forgiving welcome as well as the feast in his honor, of course we want to be him! But it really depends on where a person is in their life of faith as to which son they are.

The first son, the one who has become the star of the parable, is the younger, prodigal son. The word prodigal means reckless or wasteful as well as uncontrolled or extravagant, all of which fit this particular young man. He actually has the nerve to go to his father and request his

share of the family inheritance. The fact that he has the audacity to even make such a request tells us a few things about this young man right away. First, there's a bit of arrogance in him that he believes that he's important enough to get what's coming to him right now. Second, he doesn't really care how things are supposed to be done, he wants to have his own way. Finally, his request shows that he views his father as being more valuable to him dead than alive.

That's the truth if you think about it for a minute. An inheritance isn't given to a child or anyone else until after the parents are dead, but this young man's father still being alive makes no difference to this son. He'd rather consider his father to be dead and get what's coming to him right now. This isn't what you'd expect out of a loving son, and as soon as the young son has gotten what he wants from his father, he adds insult to injury by leaving home as soon as he can. He is so convinced that he doesn't need his father anymore that he's willing to live his life as though his father isn't even alive. To make His point even more, Jesus uses a certain word here for "inheritance" that can mean, "life" or "resources and wealth that sustain life."

It doesn't take the young son long before he spends everything that he has on what Jesus calls "reckless living." He finds himself all alone in a foreign land with no money, no resources to live on. Then, to make matters even worse, a severe famine strikes the country, and the younger son's situation rapidly turns from bad to worse. Finding himself at the lowest point of his life, the young son does the unthinkable to a Jewish mind, and he takes a job feeding pigs. His life is so bad, that even the food that the pigs are eating starts to look good to him. There is no way that he can get any lower as a Jewish man.

When he has hit rock bottom, the young son finally comes to his senses. He realizes that even his father's servants have a better life than he is now living, and he decides to go back home and ask for a job. He has no illusions about what he deserves, and he knows that he can't even

expect to be acknowledged as part of the family. But he decides that he has nothing to lose. So he leaves the pigs, and makes the journey home. He still isn't ready to give up completely. His pride will lead him to bargain for his father's help instead of admitting that he can't handle life on his own. He wants to earn his way back into his father's household.

This is where every Christian has been during their life of faith. Because of the sinful human nature everyone has fallen away from their relationship with the Father to some degree. It happens each and every time that a sin is committed. Now granted, we don't always get to the point of being as desperate as the prodigal son was, but we do act very much like him.

We have the nerve to demand that God do things our way, or we convince ourselves that we can do it better so we ignore Him altogether. In other words, we act like God doesn't matter, like He's not even there, and we do things our own way. In short, we sin. We live like His Laws are merely suggestions, and we act like our heavenly Father doesn't really exist.

God lists drunkenness as a sin right alongside an orgy? Well, as long as I don't do it all the time or hurt someone when I drink what's the harm? I'll be forgiven anyway. Besides, I need to unwind. Gossip is listed along with murder in the first chapter of Romans? It's not really all that bad, is it? Besides, I'm not really gossiping. I'm just keeping up with the latest news. I'm trying to find out what's going on because I care. What's wrong with that?

Each time we sin we decide that our will is more important than our Father's will, then we are on the same track as the prodigal son. We're acting like our heavenly Father isn't there, and we're leaving Him so that we can go our own way. When we finally have something happen that brings us to our senses, we realize that we really do need our Father. It still doesn't stop us from trying to bargain our way back to Him and from wanting to earn our salvation from Him in some way, but even the futility of that becomes obvious after a while and we genuinely repent of

the sins that separated us from Him. We return to His house, knowing that we deserve nothing from Him, but trusting in His mercy and forgiveness instead.

So, that's the younger son, but what about the older one? It's pretty easy to find ourselves acting like him too. He saw what his brother did to their father. He knew what his brother did in that far off land, and he couldn't believe how their father acted when he had the nerve to come back home. On top of all that, he wanted to know where his reward was for being the good son and staying home to work the family land even though Jesus tells us that the older son had already received his share of the inheritance too!

He knew that his brother had treated their father like dirt. He knew that that little brat had squandered everything that their father had worked for. At least a full third of the estate was gone because of him, and now he was being treated like a king!? That's not fair. He doesn't deserve to be forgiven! He's a sinner, and if he's going to be welcomed back, then I don't want any part of it!

Here is one of the primary points of the parable, and it can't be made without the older son because he is representing the people that Jesus is telling the parable too. The older son is the faithfully religious members of the society. The Pharisees and the scribes were offended that Jesus was actually associating with people who were such blatant sinners as the tax collectors. He's not supposed to do that. Those people aren't worthy of attention. So Jesus tells them about the prodigal son being welcomed home by the father, but He makes sure to point out that they are not without fault. He includes the older son in the parable to show these religious people that they are not honoring God with their sinful attitude toward repentant sinners any more than the so-called sinners are honoring Him with their sinful actions.

That's the other side of the parable, and we can easily find ourselves acting like this son as well. In fact, it's probably more likely for us to find ourselves here with the older son than with the younger one. We don't want to think that there can be a place in heaven for those who we think are worse sinners than we are, but the whole point of this parable is that forgiveness is for anyone, regardless of what we might think of them, just as Jesus made the same point in last week's Gospel lesson.

The only person left in this parable is the father. The father who grants the son his wish, and lets him leave to make his own mistakes. The father who faithfully watches for the younger son's return, and who forgets his dignity and runs to greet him when he first sees him approaching the house. The father who welcomes him back with more than just open arms, but who throws a celebration for him because he "...was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." It's interesting to note that the Greek word that Luke uses for "lost" in this part of the text, can also mean "destroyed." The younger son had been written off, but the father was willing to forgive what he had done. And when the older son showed his disgust with the situation and refused to celebrate his brother's return, the father ignores his dignity and pride once again and goes out to try and persuade him to join in the feast.

This is the heavenly Father that Jesus came to tell us all about. He wasn't the stern, angry Father waiting to pounce on the wicked children that have crossed Him. Instead, Jesus shows us a different side of our heavenly Father. For the sake of His Son, Jesus, the heavenly Father willingly forgives all of us when we are the prodigal, sinful sons, and He also forgives all of us when we are the stubborn, jealous sons. It doesn't matter what you've done, He will forgive your sins. It doesn't matter who you are, He will welcome you back. The Father's love is never-ending, and it is available to everyone. It has been bought and paid for by the blood of His Son.

Finally, this parable, as well as the two that Luke tells us about before it, shows us the mission that His Church has. There are those out there who are lost and who are as good as dead without Christ. The Lord has sent us out to help find them, and He is waiting to welcome them home too. He has called us to show them His forgiveness, and to be a different kind of son, a son who joins Him in welcoming the lost home into our Father's loving arms, to welcome them just as our Father has welcomed each one of us back to our home with Him. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.