

The Third Sunday after Trinity  
St. Luke 15:11-32

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to [Jesus] to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them.'" (Luke 15:1-2) As you heard last week, this is the complaint against Jesus. It comes after Jesus told the parable you heard last week, in which a certain man gave a great supper where the invitees were not present, but outcasts—read, sinners—from inside and outside of the city were in attendance.

So, Jesus tells more parables following the complaint.

- A man has 100 sheep, but one wanders off, so he goes off in search of it, leaving the 99 behind. When he finds it, he throws it over his shoulders and carries it back to the flock. Then, he throws a party with his friends.
- A woman has 10 coins, but she loses one somewhere in the house. She cleans up and turns the house upside down looking for it. It goes without saying, but the other nine are left alone, just fine. When she finds it, she throws a huge party, inviting her friends.

In the same way, there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 9 or 99 just persons who have no need of repentance. (cf. Luke 15:3-10)

Why does Jesus eat with sinners and tax collectors? Because Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. (cf. Luke 19:10) Because those who are healthy have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (cf. Luke 5:31) Because, again quoting Rev. Matthew Harrison, "Jesus dwells in the hearts of sinners, so you better be one." Because they—the sinners, tax collectors, the sick...those who need Jesus—are the people of the lanes of the city and hedges outside of the city. (cf. Luke 14:21, 23) In other words, these are the very people for whom Jesus has come. They are like the 1 lost sheep or 1 lost coin, for which the shepherd and woman, respectively, go searching.

But, what of the 99 or 9?

But then Jesus tells another parable to further explain Himself. You know it as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," though a better title might be "The Prodigal Son, His Elder Brother, and Their Loving Father."

Let us first take up the matter of the younger son, so labeled the prodigal. He is called prodigal because he recklessly spends his wealth in extravagant living, prodigal living as you heard in the translation I read. But, how he got there is important, too.

He was the younger of two sons the father had. One day, he approached his father and asked for his share of the inheritance. On the outset, this might sound interesting, for you perhaps are thinking that it is always the oldest brother that inherits everything from a father. What is there for a younger son to inherit? The oldest brother would inherit most, perhaps all, of what a father owns; he was expected to take over the family business. However, a father could decide to designate part of his possessions to younger sons. That's what the father does in this parable. In fact, he divides his possessions and livelihood to both sons!

What you should bear in mind is that when the younger son asked for his share of the inheritance, he essentially told his father to drop dead. How else does one inherit anything except that someone else should die? It makes the request for the inheritance that much more arrogant and brutal than simply asking for some money or stuff. Jesus didn't get into the son's motive; he could have asked his father for his inheritance for any number of reasons, and the thought that he was asking his father to "drop dead" may never have crossed his mind in doing so. Nevertheless, it is exactly what he did.

And out of great love, the father dropped dead to his son—to both his sons—and gives him what he asks for, and to the older son as well. The rest of the world might see this as insanity, and you may be thinking the same thing by now. What kind of a father would do this? What kind of a father would acquiesce so quickly to a son's demand to be dead to him? One that has great love and mercy for his sons is a father who would lavish such a gift beyond compare.

So the younger son took all that he had been given and sold it. He must have had to do this quickly or unscrupulously if, in fact, his possession of the inheritance was seen as insane. Then, taking the money, he wanders off to a foreign land, and spends the money lavishly. As with the son's motive earlier, the details of his spending are left simply to the imagination; Jesus didn't fill in the blanks. All you are told is that he spent the money extravagantly or prodigally. In fact, he wasted it and was soon out of money.

As it happened, a famine fell upon the land. What luck: the son is out of money just in time for it to become more difficult for him to find food. I'm sure you can find all sorts of lessons in that; however, it's nothing more than a point Jesus made in order to move the story along. The son joined himself to a man of the country. That man owned pigs, and the son was given the task of feeding the pigs. Things had gotten so bad, that the son began seeing the pigs' food as pleasing—certainly better than what he was getting. How low for a Jewish man to be given to feeding pigs, then wanting to eat the pigs' food!

That's when the thought occurred to him—when he came to his senses. "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" So, he concocted the scheme to back to his father groveling for forgiveness, hoping that the terms he will offer will be enough for the forgiveness he desires. What are those terms? "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."

This son saw himself as a true outcast. He was just like the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus ate, for whom Jesus had come.

The son made his way home, and as he came over the horizon, the father, sitting on the front porch in his rocking chair—he's retired now, having given everything else to the other son—saw a familiar silhouette. Even in his advanced years, he popped out of the chair and ran down the road to embrace his younger son and kiss him. The father shows the son every bit of love that a father can show, and note this well: the son has yet to make confession!

Only after the hugs and kisses does the son make his confession. You've surely noticed that the deal the son wanted to make was missing. Something happened, and you may be tempted to think that the father's actions interrupted the son, but that would make little sense since the father was in the midst of the actions before the son even began to speak. The son is in his father's embrace when he confesses and gets only as far as stating that he is no longer worthy to be called his father's son. It's almost as if he was telling the father to let him go, that he doesn't deserve the kind of love being lavished upon him. The money and lost inheritance don't matter anymore; all that matters is the broken relationship between father and son.

And the father lavishes even more upon his son. The father puts the best robe on him, a signet ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. He calls for the fatted calf to be sacrificed and a great feast to be spread. "[F]or this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

That's the younger son for you. He who asked his father to drop dead, gets his portion of the inheritance, sells it, spends it lavishly, hits his low point with swine, returns home seeking a job as a servant, and is welcomed home with the lavish love of his father. No matter the distance, nor the arrogant request made by the son, he never ceased being the son of the father, and the father's love compels him to receive him back as his son, though dead, alive again, though lost, found.

At this point in the parable is where the older son makes his appearance. He was out in the field, tending to the family business. He heard the sound of the feast and wondered what it was. He was told that his younger brother had returned and his father and received him with peace. Angry, the older son refused to go in, so the father came out and pleaded with him to join the party. His brother was back, that should have been reason to celebrate!

That's when the older son laid into his father. "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him."

The son's words indicate at first that he saw himself as a slave in his father's house. He had been serving his father for many years, never transgressing his commandment. In fact, this almost sounds like the boasts of the Pharisees. The Pharisees often boasted of keeping the commandments, even all of the rules and ordinances set up around the commandments. Jesus, however, saw right through that, calling them whitewashed tombs—clean on the outside, but full of dead, dirty bones inside. (cf. Matthew 23:27)

As if to emphasize the older son's whitewashed exterior, his words betray the idea that he keeps the commandments of God. He accused his younger brother of wasting the father's livelihood on harlots. When Jesus described the actions of the younger son, however, He never mentioned anything immoral with the lavish spending. When the older son complained, however, he assumed that his brother was carousing with prostitutes, bearing false witness against him.

The older son saw himself as the good son, the better son. However, he also removed himself from sonship, in a sense. He was off by himself when the party started. He complained that he never even got a goat to celebrate with his friends—it seems he was never interested in celebrating with his family. This may all seem like sibling rivalry, but there is more going on here. As much as the younger son had told his father to drop dead, now the older son had, in essence, wished his father dead, and his withdrawn attitude expressed as much.

Once again, though, the father expressed the love he has for his son, this, his older son. He calls out to the son, "τεκνον," a term of endearment when used to address one's child. It means "child," and carries the same endearing weight as when you hear Jesus refer to his mother as "woman." In essence, the father calls out to the older son, "My beloved son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

The parable ends there. There is no mention about the older son joining the party or not. Jesus left the question open for a reason, indicating to those who are like the older brother, who remove themselves from table fellowship with the Father (capital-F) that there is still room at the table for them.

So, that's the older son for you. He's the bitter older brother who saw himself superior to the younger, who was distant from his family as a result. He lied about the younger brother, accusing him of something that he could not have known about. He refused to celebrate the return of his brother, though the father entreated with him to do so. Yet somehow, he saw himself as the father's faithful servant. Despite his distance, he was still his father's son, still fully deserving of his father's love, because he never ceased being the son of the father, and one who is invited to be part of the feast.

And that's the father for you. He is one who was always lavish with his love on all of his children who sin against them, whether they make themselves outcasts or remain in the household but distant, no matter how far they think they have removed themselves from his love.

What you are to learn from this parable is that, just like the lost sheep and lost coin, if you are lost, then the love of God in Christ Jesus for you compels Him to have mercy on you and receive you as a son—to clothe you in His righteousness, seal you with the signet of the cross upon forehead and breast, and sacrifice and hold a great feast with you. And if you are like the older son, who would see in the Father (capital-F) and brother(s) your enemies, God in Christ Jesus has love and compassion for you and would entreat you to join the feast.

What God asks of you is to repent and believe—to come before him in confession like the younger son. You have sinned against God, asked him to drop dead by your breach of one commandment or another, wished him dead for whatever reason, and for all of that do not deserve to be called His son. Like the younger son, though, you cannot barter your way back into His grace, but for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, and His death on the cross, you are in His grace. Out of His great love and mercy, He receives you as His dear son, and invites you to the table of His Son's body and blood, shed on the cross, and given for you for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Did the older son ever repent? Perhaps—perhaps not. But for those like him, there is still time, just as there is time for you. So far as you're concerned, you are given opportunity to repent as you are brought into the house of the Father where you make repentance, and for the sake of the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, lavished with every good and perfect gift from God.

For you, the only-begotten Son is sacrificed, and a feast is spread. It is a feast of the Son's body and blood. There, you receive everything that by right should not be yours, because each and every one of you is like the younger son of the parable, wishing that God would drop dead and misusing and abusing everything that He gives you. You are not worthy to be called His son, but you are called His son, for the sake of the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, you are brought to His table where a place has been prepared for you to join in the feast of the Son's sacrifice.

For, you see, God did drop dead for you—it was Jesus who went to the cross, where He was sent to redeem you that you might receive the adoption as sons. (cf. Galatians 4:5) For the sake of Jesus Christ, you are received as a son of the Father, clothed in the robe of Christ's righteousness, sealed with the sign of the cross, shod with the shoes of salvation, forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.