

20th Sunday after Pentecost October 23, 2022

PRODIGAL SONS; FORGIVING FATHER

Luke 15:11-32

Scripture Readings

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Hymns

279, 388, 342, 324

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

+ *In the Name of Jesus Christ* +

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all that he had and traveled to a distant country. There he wasted his wealth with reckless ["prodigal," or wasteful] living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."'"

"He got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.' Then they began to celebrate.

"His older son was in the field. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant told him, 'Your brother is here! Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' The older brother was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

"He answered his father, 'Look, these many years I've been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'

"The father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.'" (EHV)

Which brother are you in this story? Which character in Jesus' parable do you resemble or relate to the most: The "runaway" son or the "resentful" one? Are you more often the "un-faithful," or the "un-forgiving" one? Don't we have to admit that we've often got a bit of both of them in us?

This is a very familiar parable to most of us. In fact, it might be Jesus' most famous parable. Many consider it to be His greatest. But did you ever realize that both of the sons in the parable were **“prodigals”**? They were! **“Prodigal”** means *wasteful* and both of these sons in our parable for this morning were “wasteful” of what their Father had given them. And so today we will consider the **“Prodigal Sons” and the Forgiving Father**. First, let's look at how we are like these **“prodigal sons.”**

1) We are like the unfaithful “prodigal” younger son when we are wasteful of God’s grace, His gifts, and generous love.

Can you see yourself in the younger **“prodigal”** son? I, unfortunately, can see a lot of me in him! Don't we often do what this foolish and impatient young son did? This young son asked for his father's inheritance before his father was even close to dead. Talk about impatience! This young man suffered from the same thing that afflicts most, if not all, of us in our modern society: the desire for “instant gratification.” We want what we want, and we want it NOW! How often has our impatience with God or our desire for “instant gratification” led us down a similar path (at least in a spiritual sense) as the younger **“prodigal”** son? We pray to God for something in our lives and when He doesn't allow us to have it right away, or makes it very clear that at this time His answer is “No,” we still try and give God the “end around,” very often, don't we? We just go and get it anyway, or find some “loophole” that we can use to ease our consciences and convince ourselves that it was “God's will” that we were “blessed” with this or that thing. But does what we were chasing after, whatever it is—whether it is something sinful in and of itself or not—does it fulfill us? No! Most often it *empties* us, like it did the younger **“prodigal”** son and leads us further away from God. It's not long before we're running from God and His will, staying away from His house, neglecting His Word, hanging out with the wrong kind of people, and we find ourselves immersed in wrong influences. In short, we live *“wastefully,”* just like the younger **“prodigal”** son—spiritually, physically, mentally, and materially.

We know God does not want us to waste His gifts with this type of living, but when we “come to our senses,” like the younger **“prodigal”** son in our parable, and realize we've done wrong what do we do next? Do we hesitate to return to God in repentance and prayer because of our guilt and in fear of His anger and punishment? Do we feel deep down inside after we've sinned that we'd better stay away from God for a while (i.e. not pray to Him, turn to Him in His Word, or worship in His house) and give Him some time to “cool off” until He's no longer mad at us? Well, that “voice” deep down inside that's telling you to think that isn't from God. That's a lie of Satan trying to keep you from God and His abundant blessings of forgiveness and love so that you'll just continue “wasting” God's gifts and His grace! Come back! Come running back to God when you've sinned! Return to your Father! Look at the repentant heart of the younger **“prodigal”** in our text:

¹⁷“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! ¹⁸I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’” (Luke 15:17-19)

This is one of the key “turning” points in the parable, isn't it, both literally and figuratively? For, you see, *repentance* is exactly that: a “turning”—a turning from our life of sin toward our Savior Jesus and His forgiving love. We see this young **“prodigal's”** repentant heart in his conversation with himself as he sits filthy and starving among the swine.

Most importantly, look at the reaction of the father—your Father! Did His love ever change or go away? No! There was no need for a “turning” on the Father's part. He always loved His son! In fact, it has been suggested that the *Father*, not the **“prodigal son(s),”** is the central character in this parable. Some have

called this parable, “The parable of the Father’s love. This parable shows just how far God’s love is willing to go for one who has returned and repented from his/her wandering ways. Even before the younger **“prodigal”** son is able to make his confession, the waiting father spots his son on the road and runs out to welcome him with hugs and kisses.

That is the “excess” of God’s grace! The “excesses” of the younger son’s wastefulness are *exceeded* by the “excesses” of the Father’s grace and forgiveness! Our Father in heaven loves us sinners even before we make our statement of repentance (see **Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**). And He and His angels literally “throw a party” out of joy when a lost sinner returns to his/her Father’s house. Jesus said just a few verses earlier in this same chapter of Luke, **“In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”** (Luke 15:10)

The **“older son,”** however, did not share in this joy at all. Don’t we also see a bit (sometimes quite a bit!) of ourselves in the **“prodigal”** older son?

2) We are often like the unforgiving “prodigal” older son; wasteful of God’s kindness, mercy, and forgiveness when we don’t appreciate it and don’t give it away to others.

Can we identify with this older brother? Can we blame him? Do you have “spoiled” younger siblings? I’m an older brother and I know what it’s like to feel this way: “You didn’t punish him like you punished me. You didn’t treat him like you treat me! You didn’t give me the things you gave him! You spoil him cause he’s the younger son!” etc. Don’t we often feel “justified” for being angry and resentful when we’ve been “wronged” in this way? Well, the first thing we need to realize is that the father was not showing his lavish grace and love to his younger son to make the older son mad or to shove it in his face. Of course not! That is just how this father is: loving, generous, gracious, and forgiving to all. He is the same way toward the older **“prodigal”** and loves Him just as much.

The other thing we need to realize is that the illustration of this older brother finds its immediate comparison in the Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ day! Remember how “justified” they felt in looking scornfully on the “sinners” of society—tax collectors, prostitutes, and other public sinners—and in criticizing Jesus for being a **“friend of tax collectors and sinners.”** (Luke 7:34)

Are we cold, unforgiving, skeptical, and resentful when we hear or see “sinners” coming to repentance and faith? When we read reports from our missionaries overseas and hear about the hundreds who are coming to faith in Christ and are being baptized, do we look upon our brothers and sisters in those churches with jealousy, skepticism, and resentment? Or do we rejoice with God and the angels of heaven that another **“prodigal”** soul has returned home and escaped from death to life eternal!

Are we like the Pharisee when we are in God’s house, looking at others and thinking, “I can’t believe *she’d* show her face in church!” “Who does *he* think he is coming here! Well, I guess, it’s about time!” Think again of Jesus’ words in the parables that come just before our sermon text, **“I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.”** (Luke 15:7)

We must admit we are both the **“prodigal”** and the **“older son”**; we are guilty of both “unfaithfulness” and “unforgiveness.”

3) The Good News is that God, our Father, forgives us unquestioningly and unconditionally with open arms because of another “Brother”—our “Brother” Jesus!

Listen again to the Father's reaction to both of his sons:

²⁰**“He got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him. ²¹The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’ Then they began to celebrate....**

³¹**“The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³²But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.”** (Luke 15:20-24, 31-32)

Our loving, gracious heavenly Father calls and welcomes back the lost and the straying (cf. Luke 15:1-10), and pleads with the stony heart of the unforgiving (v. 31-32). He pleads with us through His apostle Paul, **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.”** (Ephesians 4:32)

Follow our Father's example. Look to the source of our forgiveness for the inspiration and the ability to forgive—not to the brothers in our text, but to the one who told us this parable: our Brother Jesus! He is the reason our Father forgives us our many sins in the first place. He took all our sins, including our sins of “unfaithfulness” and “unforgiveness” and nailed them to Himself on the cross of Calvary! He did this for you and me so that He could rejoice with the angels in heaven the day you were brought to repentance and faith through His Holy Spirit's work in the Gospel in both Word and the sacrament of Baptism.

Have you been straying from God? Are you “straying” from God right now? Are you harboring resentment and unforgiveness in your heart against someone, or perhaps, a number of people?

Return to your loving, forgiving heavenly Father! This Father forgives the “wild” and “unfaithful,” as well as the “resentful” and “unforgiving!” This Father loves you so much He sacrificed **“His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”** (John 3:16) This Father will not turn you away! This Father loves us no matter what we've done, no matter what sins we have committed. Like the father of the **“prodigal sons”** we spoke about today, God the Father forgives us freely and joyfully accepts us back into His house. He opens His arms wide—with no “I told you so,” scolding, or punishments, but rather He will say to us **“Welcome home!... ‘for my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’** (v. 24) No matter how far we've strayed from God's plan, we've never been farther than the reach of His hand. We can be sure of this because Jesus opened His arms wide and stretched out His hands on the cross and “welcomed us” into God's family; into His kingdom of heaven; and into the state of peace that comes from the full and free forgiveness of sins! Thank the Lord that we **“Prodigal sons (and prodigal daughters!)”** have such a **forgiving Father!** Amen.

—Pastor Luke Bernthal

St. Stephen Lutheran Churches
Mt. View and Hayward, CA