

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

I'm actually grateful that the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, because it led to Jesus telling this beautiful parable. He tells it on account of the older son. The Pharisees and scribes are this older son, angry that Jesus is welcoming sinners and eating with them - a most intimate thing to do. He does not speak this parable against the tax collectors and prostitutes. They are the younger son. But they are drawing near to Jesus. They were dead but are now alive; lost but are found.

We will most certainly see tax collectors and prostitutes in heaven, such as these. But will we see the older brother there? The former ones are repenting of their life of sin. But the Pharisees and scribes? These are refusing to repent.

Which one are you...the older son or the younger? Do we have to choose? Can't I leave myself out of the parable entirely? Yes, but then you have no forgiving God. If we want our God to be the forgiving father in this parable then we must be one of his sons in the parable.

And the truth actually is that we're both. I see myself in the younger son and also in the older son. And if you're like me, you do too. And rejoice, for we have a forgiving Father.

This parable captures the very heart of Lent: repentance and forgiveness; returning to the Lord for He is gracious and merciful. This is the younger son's story. He was bad. What more can we say? But God showed mercy to him even before he thought about coming back. He allowed him to hit rock bottom. He lost everything and ended up in a pig pen - the most degrading thing of all for a Jew. Had this son not lost everything, he surely would not have repented and returned to his father. He would have remained a lost and dead sinner.

And so would we. God, in mercy, may throw us to the pigs when we behave like the younger son. As with that boy, this is how He can bring us back to our senses. It's how He brings us back to Him. There is only one way back: the road of repentance. That son was not waltzing back to his father with head held high and chest out. He came back in shame and sorrow.

What do you think...the father had compassion on him when he saw him...but what if his son had come down the road to the father's house unrepentant? The Lord rejects the proud but receives the humble. If anyone of us comes here to the Father's house with anything but a repentant heart, we are deceiving ourself.

We begin our Divine Service with the Invocation, reminding ourselves that we truly are, by virtue of our baptism, sons and daughters of our dear Father in heaven. And then immediately together we confess our sins to Him just like the returning prodigal. As he left his pride back in the pig pen, so must we.

And for such as these the Father has beautiful words of mercy. He listened to his younger son's confession. And immediately he forgave him - embracing him and kissing him, the best robe, the ring for his finger, the fattened calf to be slaughtered and eaten. All these are declaring to his son that he is fully pardoned. No scolding, no harsh word to him. "Why did I delay so long in

returning?” the son was surely asking himself; “for my father is full of love for me, and he loves to forgive.”

This is exactly how God treats you. He hears your confession, but even before you speak, His heart is full of compassion for you. And immediately He assures you. No scolding. No harsh word to you. Pure mercy. “I forgive you,” He declares to each one of you through the mouth of His servant. See in this word of pardon His full embrace, His holy kisses. See Him covering you with the robe of Jesus’ righteousness and pointing to your baptism as the beautiful ring you wear.

And then also He bids you to come in to the feast, for the fattened calf has been slaughtered for you. And here at His table He gives you a place and there is comfort, joy, and celebrating as you eat the fattened calf, who is Christ for you.

This parable teaches us that no one is without hope. No one has sinned too much or too grievously that he or she is unwelcome in the Father’s house. Your heavenly Father loves to forgive. His heart is filled with compassion for those for whom Christ died; and He died for you because He died for all.

Sadly this is not the heart of the older son. He is unforgiving. And his unforgiving heart causes him to be angry; angry even at his father. Are we ever angry in this way? Angry at a returning prodigal who has some nerve sitting here with us? Angry that others here welcome such a prodigal?

The older son wanted no part of the celebration. There was a place for him also within the father’s house and at the feast. His father, in mercy, pleaded with him to come in. But his unforgiving heart kept him away. He, unlike his younger brother, had no sin to confess, and so he had no use for the father’s house or the feast.

It is very important that we understand something about this parable. If the devil is unable to tempt you into being the younger son so that you fall deeply into sin, he tempts you to be the older son so that you are judgmental of those who do fall into sin.

Both sons have a forgiving father. And so do you. You are here in your Father’s house. This is a place of mercy, and this is the table of forgiveness. Only sinners are welcome here. However Satan tempts us, we find here a Father’s love. We find pardon for whatever wrong we have done.

Since our Father, for Jesus’ sake, finds joy in forgiving us, we will finish the older son’s story for him. We will always come in, at our Father’s urging, to receive mercy, and we will celebrate the comforting truth that Jesus does receive sinners, sinners even like us. Amen.