

*“This man receives sinners and eats with them!”* This angry complaint about Jesus, uttered by the scribes and Pharisees, is the same angry complaint uttered by the elder brother: *“When this son of yours came...you killed the fattened calf for him!”* What is remarkable is that both the scribes and Pharisees, along with the elder brother, are proclaiming, loud and clear, the sweet, precious Gospel.

That sweet Gospel is here today and is for you. The fattened calf has been killed and is on the altar for you. Here is Jesus who welcomes you to His table. The feasting and celebrating in the house of the father, over the return of his lost son, is continuing this very day because, thanks be to God, He *“receives sinners and eats with them.”*

I don't know where you have been since you were last here. No questionnaire will be put to you asking how far you have strayed, how deeply into sin you have fallen. When the prodigal son returned to the house of his father, even before he could make his confession, his father welcomed him with pure joy. The son did confess his sins, for he returned with a repentant heart. Yet his father interrupted his confession to restore to him much more than he had squandered by his reckless, sinful life.

Oh, we could ask how this son could have even left his father in the first place. But we already know the answer in our hearts. It's why we leave our dear Father; leave His house, His table of grace; leave even our baptism, to go after the world and all that it has to offer.

We know all too well why the prodigal son left his father, but how much better to know why his father received him back with open arms. This is the heart of our God who loves nothing more than to receive back to Himself poor, worthless sinners.

This prodigal son learned two things. A condition worse than death is to be lost, and a condition better than life is to be found. When we learn what the prodigal son learned, we above all people, are most blessed.

There is only one prodigal son in the parable. His elder brother was not a prodigal. He did not waste his father's property. But it might have been better for him if he had. His heart was angry, not repentant. Why should he repent? *“I never disobeyed,”* he told his father. Not all prodigals return. Yet had he, too, been a prodigal, perhaps he, too, would have come back confessing his sins. He did not learn, for he had no reason to learn, what his younger brother learned. He could not see that he was lost, and so he was unwilling to be found.

Jesus teaches us by His parable that one can be lost whether that one is far away from the Father's house or not. Yet He also teaches us that the Father welcomes back all who are lost. Not a harsh word did the father speak to the prodigal son or to the elder brother. The one he welcomed back. And the other he invited back. To both he showed tender love and compassion.

That same love and compassion He shows to us. Sometimes we are more like the prodigal son. Other times more like the elder brother. It matters not to our God. However lost we have been in

our sins, He rejoices over us to find us and receive us back. However lost we may be right now, He invites us to turn away from our sin and be a part of His family again.

The feasting and celebrating is going on, with us or without us. And we have every reason to join in because all our sins have been laid upon the fattened calf. He was killed on the cross so that every sinner can celebrate in the Father's house now and forever.

Jesus' parable is commonly called the parable of the Prodigal Son, or sometimes the parable of the Two Sons. But then the focus is either on the reckless, wasteful son or on his angry, elder brother. Would it not be better to focus on the father in the parable? Call it, perhaps, the parable of the Forgiving Father, or even the parable of the Prodigal Father.

Yes, a prodigal father he was. Prodigal means utterly wasteful. And to the eyes of any sane individual, this father was very wasteful. He wasted the grand celebration, complete with the slaughter of the fattened calf, on his son. And what did his son do to deserve all this? He squandered his property on reckless living. It's as if the father rewarded his son for falling headlong into wickedness.

I suppose, then, that the only sane people in our text are the scribes and Pharisees. They alone see how utterly wasteful is Jesus for receiving sinners and eating with them. Almost as if He is rewarding them for having lived lives of wickedness. And this angers them just as it angered the elder brother.

But this is God, and this is the Gospel. The reward of our sinfulness falls upon Jesus. We celebrate as He goes to the slaughter on the cross. No sane person can accept this. And truly, our human logic cannot accept the Gospel. It is utterly wasteful to see God declaring sinners forgiven at the expense of the spotless Lamb of God. To believe this is beyond our understanding. It is the work of the Holy Spirit alone.

My friend, your dear Father rejoices over you. He rejoices to grant you His Holy Spirit to work in you, to believe that, yes, God wasted Himself on you. He forgives you. The fattened calf is on the altar for you and is proof of this. Your baptism is proof of this. In your baptism He declares to you that He is your forgiving Father for Jesus' sake, and at His expense. And so, for you the feasting and celebrating continues today, and always, in the house of the Father. Amen.