

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

We live in a just society, don't we? There is a price which must be paid when wrongs are committed. There was a slogan some years back: "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." Well then, how is it that this prodigal son gets off scot-free? He takes his inheritance and blows it on prostitutes. He doesn't have a shred of moral decency in his body. He lives selfishly, immorally, wickedly. But after he winds up in the pig pen, he comes back home and he doesn't receive a whipping; no life behind bars; he isn't thrown out the door; he isn't even placed on probation. His father rushes out to him, welcomes him, loves him, reinstates him as his son. It's as if the past number of years of sin for him never even took place. Where's the justice in this? Who's going to pay for all the evil this prodigal son committed?

That's what his older brother wanted to know. Maybe that's what we'd like to know. This may be one time when we have to agree with the scribes and Pharisees. "Jesus, how can You receive sinners and eat with them as if they had done no wrong? Where's the justice in that? Shouldn't they be made to pay for their wicked life?"

But with our own words we condemn ourselves, just as the older brother condemned himself by his words. "*I have never disobeyed you,*" he told his father. And yet it was his father's will that he come into the house, and take part in the feast, and celebrate in the return of his brother - something he was unwilling to do.

There is justice in the parable, but it wasn't in the life and conduct of the older brother. And no, we do not see it in the prodigal either. Who pays for his crimes? It's not him. It's not his brother. It's not the servants. It's not the father. Somebody had to pay. Evil cannot go unpunished. Justice must be served, even with God...in fact, especially with God.

So in the parable, who gets stuck paying the price for all the wickedness committed by the prodigal son? It was the fattened calf. He paid the price. He was slaughtered for the feast. Everyone else was celebrating, but not the fattened calf. In fact, he was fattened up for the feast. Without him there would have been no feast. He didn't feast with the others. He was put to death so that everyone else could feast.

There's your justice. Someone did pay. Not the one who did the crimes; the innocent calf. And yet the wickedness of the prodigal son did not go unpunished. That calf paid the price with his life.

Jesus is that fattened calf, and you and I are prodigal sons and daughters. This story is for you in every way. There is comfort here; forgiveness, mercy, assurance, peace, hope. No punishment - not for you...for Jesus. He was slaughtered on Calvary's cross for you and me. We did the crimes, but Jesus paid the price.

But this doesn't seem fair and just, even to us. Look at the prodigal in our parable. He did not want to get off scot-free. His plan was to tell his father to make him one of his hired servants. He was sorry for his life of sin, and he knew that his wickedness could not go unpunished. He would

have to pay the price. He couldn't just waltz back home and expect to be received as a son. He would apply for a job as a servant. This was his plan for justice.

We have similar plans. We live as prodigals far too often. We live selfishly as he did. We live immorally, hypocritically. We live as prodigals, but then we have the nerve to judge others who live in the same way.

But then something happens in our life that brings us to our senses. God does this in mercy. He seeks us even while we are living apart from Him. And He brings us back home to Him; back to His open arms; back to our church family; back to where the fattened calf, which was slaughtered for us all, is laid upon the altar so that we can feast.

But our justice system is different from that of God's. We think we must pay for what we have done. We dare not return as beggars with nothing. We must return with something that God will accept; something good about us or in us; something noble; something He is pleased with so that He will receive us back as sons and daughters.

No, friends. I say this gently, but firmly. No! You and I can come to God with one thing, and one thing only: our life of sinfulness. The father stopped his prodigal son in mid-sentence. He would not permit him to come forward with his plan for justice. The father already knew how justice would be served. That calf was being prepared for just this purpose.

And for you, too...even before you and I were born, God prepared beforehand the manner in which He would receive us back to Himself. His Son was fattened up for this purpose; fattened up with all of our immorality; with our sins and wickedness; our selfishness and hypocrisy. Jesus came for no other reason than to be slaughtered for every sinner. This is God's justice. He receives you to Himself no matter where you have been, or what you have done, because the price of your sin and mine was laid upon Jesus. *"Nothing in my hand I bring,"* we sing, *"Simply to Thy cross I cling."*

Friend (and I am speaking to each and every one of you), God forgives you from His merciful heart. He forgives you not because you bring something good to Him. He forgives you because your sin is laid upon Christ on the cross.

He is your fattened calf. And so you, who were dead but are now alive in Christ, can feast. You, who were once lost but have been found, are given a place in your Father's house, at your Father's table. It matters not how grievous your sins have been. It matters not how long you have been away. God's arms are open to you. No older brother has the right to make you feel unwelcome. Every sinner is welcome in the house of the Father. The fattened calf has been slaughtered. The feast is here now. And the feast is for you. Amen.