

Luke 15:11-32

Jesus' parable in Luke 15 is very well known, but by different names. Some call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Others call it the Parable of the Two Sons. Still others refer to it as the Parable of the Forgiving Father. But we know it best as the Parable of the Three Sons. Yes, that's correct. Three, not two sons, but three. The one son was a prodigal, a runaway--he lived for himself. The elder brother was the second son. He was jealous and had no love or mercy within him. And then there is the third son who was a good boy, or daughter as the case may be, and that's us. Never mind that there is no third child in the story. We put him there. He has to be there because we're not the prodigal--he was too wicked; we're not the elder brother--he was too mean. So there has to be a third son, or daughter...us.

It's true, isn't it? We really do not relate too well to the parable the way Jesus tells it. We think of the prodigal as being all the really bad people out there who want nothing to do with God. We think of the elder brother as unloving, unkind people very much unlike us. So we create a third category for ourselves. Not a prodigal. Not an elder brother. A third child...good, obedient, kind.

But the father in the story shows mercy only to two. To the prodigal, to the elder brother, and to no one else. So if we are not one or the other; if we're not the prodigal son or the unloving older brother, then we have no forgiving Father. So as painful as it may be, you and I need to see ourselves as one or the other, and even at times, as both. The truth is that Christ Lutheran Church has many prodigals in it. It also has many elder brothers. And if we are not willing, both pastor and people, to see ourselves as one or the other, and often as both, then we have no forgiving Father; no place with Him in His home.

But fellow sinners, it is okay to see ourselves in such a bad way because more than anything, this parable is about the mercy of God. The overarching theme of the story is not how bad the first boy was, or how snotty the second boy was. It's how merciful the Father is. So if you are a prodigal son, do not despair. No matter how much you have lived for yourself, you have a place in your Father's house. And in the story that boy went to the extreme, didn't he, in living for himself? First of all, he turned his back on his loving father. He was tired of living under his rules. He wanted to satisfy the desires of his sinful flesh. And he did, using every penny he had.

Are you guilty of that? I'm looking at a whole lot of prodigals, aren't I? And you're looking at one, too. To run away from God's will for our lives is part of our sinful flesh. We don't like God's rules. We like living by our own. And so we too, often daily, turn our back on Him. And it's not pretty. It's sad when we willfully set aside God's commandments in order to please ourselves. And what's sadder still is that many prodigals never come home. Because to live apart from God is sad, but to die without Him is as sad as it gets.

That boy in the story came home, and today you, too, are home. And you know what? There will be no investigation to find out where you have been. The father did not demand of his son, "Where were you!" He just opened his arms and forgave him. And those same arms are open for you today. Whether you, like the boy in the story, were out last week spending money on prostitutes; whether you were out stealing; whether you hurt your neighbor terribly by what you said or did, God's arms of mercy are open to you. There are no demands here today. There is only forgiveness.

But the elder brother did not understand what forgiveness was. He thought he had no need of it, and he did not want his father giving it to his younger brother. If there is someone in your life whom you

despise; someone who should not be forgiven either by God or by you, then you are the elder brother. And aren't there days when we all act like him? The difference, really, between the two brothers is not that one was a sinner and the other was not. It's not even that the one was a greater sinner than the other. It's that the younger brother was sorry for his sins; the older brother was not. The prodigal repented; his elder brother refused to repent. And yet the father showed mercy to him, too. He spoke to him with compassion. He begged him to let go of his pride, his jealousy, his anger. He begged him to come in and partake of the feast.

And friends, that feast is always here for you. The fattened calf in the story is none other than Christ Himself. When the prodigal son came home, the calf was slaughtered. But what did he ever do? He was an obedient cow. He did not run away. He did not complain. But the father, who should have punished his son, punished the calf instead. The calf gave up his life so that the others could feast, rejoice, and celebrate.

That's what Jesus did for you. He was slaughtered on the cross so that you can celebrate as Christians. His blood was shed so that your life will be spared. He was punished that you may be the forgiven ones. And you, the sons and daughters of the merciful Father, are feasting upon that fattened calf as Jesus' words fill your ears and as His body and blood are given to you to eat at His altar. But the elder brother wanted no part of it. The feast was going on in the house, but he refused to come in--because it was a feast of forgiveness, a feast of mercy, of grace for poor, wretched sinners.

We're not told if that elder brother ever repented. We're not told if he came in to his father's house to partake of the feast. In the same way, I don't know and you don't know if the elder brothers out there will ever come in to the Father's House to partake of the feast of God's mercy. But I do know that you are here--elder brothers and prodigal sons all of you--and because you are, you have a forgiving Father. That father in the story welcomed his prodigal son with loving arms because his mercy was greater than his son's disobedience. And that is true for you. There is no wicked thing you have ever done, or ever could do, which would turn your Heavenly Father against you. His mercy is greater than any sin of yours.

If your conscience bothers you, if you doubt at all God's mercy toward you, then remember this parable. The younger son had doubts, and fears, and regrets, and a lot of guilt. He came home looking at himself and saying, "I am awful! I am such a sinner!" But his father removed his doubts. He calmed his fears. He forgave his guilt. He treated him as if he had done no wrong. He loved him as a son. And so you, dear sons and daughters of the merciful Father, this story is for you. You are here in your Father's House, and He looks upon you as though you have done no wrong because He forgives you. To you He says, "Look at the fattened calf. Look at Christ. He was slaughtered for you, and the feast now is for you to enjoy forever."

So what shall we call this parable? The Prodigal Son? The Two Sons? Let's stop calling it the Parable of the Three Sons. Let's admit that, like the two boys in the story, we are sinners, great sinners. But I think "The Forgiving Father" is a good name for this parable because He is, always, for Jesus' sake. Amen.