

Parable of the Prodigal Son

March 31, 2019

Our Savior's Way
Worshiping Sundays 8:00, 9:30, & 11:00 AM
Pastor Labuhn

When you were younger, did your dad have a favorite? A couple of years ago, one of my daughters asked if she was my favorite. I replied as any parent would by saying that I love all my children the same. Then she told me that she knew that my son was probably my favorite, but she wanted to know if she was my favorite daughter. She told me that she and her siblings have had an ongoing dialogue for years, as to who was the most favored, and she wanted to be the most favored one.

Maybe you've experienced that in your life. Maybe you've felt that since your parents allowed your older sibling to do more things than you, or maybe they let the younger ones do and get away with things that they would have never let you do when you were that age. It seems like in many families, this dynamic seems to play itself out.

So, does this play itself out within the family of God? Does God the Father have favorites? Maybe you're thinking, of course, Jesus is His favorite. But I'm guessing that the Pharisees thought that they were the favorites. Maybe that's why, when they saw Jesus spending time with tax collectors and sinners, they said to themselves, "***This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.***" Jesus responds by sharing three parables – the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son – yet, it's this last parable, that addresses the kind of love that God has for his children.

The parable begins with a father who had two sons. The younger son, who had become discontent living at home, decided to let his father know that he wanted his portion of the inheritance. It was as if he was saying to his father, I wish you would die already so that I could have what's coming to me. And so, instead of rebuking his younger son, the father divided his property between his two sons and gave them their inheritance. And as much as it hurts God, what we find is that God doesn't force us to remain in his household if we don't want to be there. He loves us too much to do that, instead He allows us to go when we persist.

So what do you think the younger son does after his father gave him what he wanted? He makes plans to get away and celebrate! Finally, he had the ability to get away and live the way that he wanted to live, to do the things that he always wanted to do. Wild living is how Jesus describes it. The same way that the tax collectors and sinners may have been living when Jesus came to see them. After all, they had abandoned God's commandments and had taken advantage of their freedom, by charging people more in taxes than was required. Which meant that with the "extra" money they collected, they could "enjoy" life a little more than others. That could be why they were so despised, disliked, and considered to be sinners.

But as you may know, this kind of life doesn't last very long, and it didn't last very long for the prodigal son. Because after a few months, he ran out of money, and after that, there was a famine in the land where he was living. Life wasn't so fun and times were tough for the prodigal son, because the only job that he could find was the most degrading of jobs for those of Jewish descent – that of tending and feeding pigs. Still he found that even though he had a job and was getting paid, it didn't even pay him enough money to eat. He was starving and the pigs were eating better than he was.

Sometimes it takes a lot before we come to our senses. And it was at that point that the prodigal son began to realize how wrong he was for leaving his father's house. Even his father's hired hands had food to spare. So he decided to go back to his father, and even though he had given up his right to be called a son, he would say to

his father, ***“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me one of your hired men.”*** (v.18b-19) It was then that the prodigal son became repentant as he made his way back to his father.

Still, the most impressive part of this parable isn't the prodigal son's repentance, but rather the father's reaction to his return. For ***“While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”*** (v.20) Before the prodigal son could even finish his confession, his father began to rejoice and celebrate his return. His son said that he was no longer worthy to be called a son, and what does the father do? He tells his servants to put a robe of distinction on him, a signet ring of authority on his finger, shoes on his feet, and to butcher the calf that had been fattened for a special occasion. They would all celebrate because as the father says, ***“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*** (v.24)

This is the kind of grace that God shares with us. Before we can even confess our sins, He embraces and kisses us. Rather than making us prove our love and devotion to him once again, He reconciles us to Himself, out of His great love for us, giving us the robe of Christ's righteousness that covers all our sins. Our sins are washed away through Holy Baptism and He gives to us His Holy Spirit to carry with us as a signet ring. Not only that but His servants prepare a heavenly banquet for us to mark the occasion and celebrate the Lord's Supper together, assuring us of His love and forgiveness.

However, as often is the case in families, that joyous celebration given in honor of the younger son, is overshadowed by resentment of the older son. The father goes outside to the older son, but the older son refuses, saying, ***“Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of YOURS who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.”*** (v.29-30) By staying home, the older son hadn't stayed because he

simply loved his father, rather he expected to receive something more for all his work. He overestimated his own goodness. And while he had obeyed his orders outwardly, as it turned out, inwardly he hadn't obeyed because he only did things out of a sense of obligation instead of joy. He was caught in his self-righteousness, as was the case of Pharisees and the teachers of the law, who said, ***“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”***

While we might want to be the favorite one. Our Heavenly Father simply does not have any favorites. He simply wants all sinners to repent and receive the joy of His forgiveness. You can go your own way, thinking that life would be better without Him, until you hit rock bottom and come back. Or you can faithfully serve Him and become disenchanted because of wrong motives. Either way, Jesus shares with us to pay attention to the Father and the love that He has for you. Confess your sins, leave them at the cross where Jesus died with them, be reconciled through Him with God the Father and enjoy the warmth of His embrace both now and always.

In Jesus' Name. Amen