

**Luke 15:1-3,11-32**

Lent 4C + March 31, 2019

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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The Third Son

The Word of the Lord from Luke 13: The father said, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

These boys need to get in the house – and what silly excuses they have for staying outside! What is the father to do with his two sons, so different from one another, and yet so much the same?

There's the younger son, and he's a piece of work. He essentially says to his father, "I'd like my share of the inheritance now, because I am tired of waiting for you to die." Once he receives his share, it's no surprise that he leaves the family farm behind and runs off on his grand adventure. Never much for responsibility, he goes through half of the family fortune in no time, ends up feeding pigs for a job ... ends up envying the pigs because they are eating better than he. He dreams of going back home, but ... would his father ever want to see him again?

In fact, the invitation has always been there: the father has always hoped that his younger son would turn from his sin and come home. In fact, the father spends a fair amount of time outside, looking down the road in case he sees a familiar figure coming home.

Now the son appears, and any doubts about his father's love are completely unjustified: for as soon as he sees the emaciated scarecrow shuffling down the road, the father runs to him – embraces him, kisses him! This is no show – it's a gut level-compassion.

The son has come, and he stands outside. In fact, he doesn't intend to go inside. Instead, he begins the little speech he prepared back in the pigpen. During the rehearsal, it had three talking points and he starts to run through them:

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." Well, that's certainly true.

"I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Also true.

"Treat me as one of your hired servants." That seems a fair offer. If he's no longer worthy to be family, but he wants to hang around the house, then "servant" is the next best option.

It sounds reasonable, but he's mistaken: he's underestimated his father's love. You could even argue that this third part of his speech is an insult to his father, for it casts doubt on his character and his mercy.

The father won't entertain the third point: in fact, he won't even let him say it! He interrupts, turns to his servants and says, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Hire and treat his son like a servant? No way! Whatever the son has done, he's still family; and the father's compassion is so great that he welcomes him back with open arms – and a party! They

sacrifice the fattened calf and celebrate with music and dancing. The son is in the house! He was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. Let the celebration begin!

But the father finds himself outside again, for there's also the older son. He's the good boy, the one who has honored his father, hasn't left home, whose workload has probably doubled with his brother running off. He trudges in, sweaty and grimy, from the field; and as he draws near the house, he hears the sounds of celebration, music and dancing. He summons a servant, who tells him the news: "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound."

The older son has no desire to join the party. He also has a speech to give, composed on the spot to sum up a long resentment brought to boil: "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"

Being pretty skilled at self-righteousness myself, I get this argument. To the point, it's this: "Only one of us has earned the right to be your son, and it's not my brother!" As long as that little dumpster fire is inside the house, the older son isn't going in.

Funny thing: although he's trying to show how different he is, the older son demonstrates how much he's like his brother. Both apparently have underestimated the father's love. More certainly, both of them think that they are only children because they earn the right. However, they're not part of the family because they've earned the right: they're their father's sons *by birth* ... and they didn't do any work to be born.

The father is still compassionate, and so he says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." The older son isn't a son because he's earned his keep: he's a son because he's a son, and all that the father has is his.

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You are a child of God. It is not because you've earned the right by your own reason or strength or works, but because you've been born into the family of God. This is the point of the parable: after all, remember why Jesus tells it. As tax collectors and other sinners draw near to hear Jesus, the Pharisees grumble and say, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

In the parable, the older son represents the Pharisees. They're staunchly convinced that you've got to earn your way into the family of God, and so they're careful to earn their points by keeping their rules. They see no need for forgiveness, because they believe their works atone for sin. The younger son represents the tax collectors and other "sinners": far from trying to keep the rules, they've run away and broken them all. If they've got to earn their way into the family of God, they've dug a hole too deep to climb out of.

We can assume that the tax collectors and sinners who come to hear Jesus share something else with the younger son: contrition. If they were still living a life of reckless squandering and cavorting with prostitutes, they wouldn't be seeking Jesus. They know they're unholy, they know they haven't kept the rules, and they've come to Jesus because He tells them that they can still be among God's holy children.

It's important to note that context: if you don't, you'll probably come away with the wrong idea. You'll either be disappointed that the father is soft on crime; or else you'll be excited that he's gone soft on crime, and wonder what you can get away with. Either way, you'll be underestimating His righteous

anger and overestimating His toleration of sin. Either way, you'll be thinking that Jesus is saying that it's better to be a sinner than a Pharisee. That's off the mark: what Jesus is saying is that, whether you're the sinner or the Pharisee, you need to be repentant.

Your confession of faith should be a combination of the two sons. Like the younger son, you should confess, "I have sinned against God and my neighbor, and I am not worthy to be called a child of God." Like the older son, you should confess, "It is a good thing to be a child in the house of God, and to go about my labors there in service to Him." And *unlike* both, you should also confess, "I am not a child in God's house because I have worked my way in, but because I have been born into that family."

This is true; but to get it right, we're still missing something. We are missing the third Son.

He isn't mentioned in the parable: He's telling it, and He gets both brothers into the house by the shedding of His blood. The Father hasn't gone soft on crime and wrongdoing – His compassion hasn't destroyed His sense of justice. Instead, He exercises His justice and judgment elsewhere, on a hill called Calvary. There, the third Son – the good Son, the innocent Son – pays the debt and suffers the judgment for the sins of the others. He fulfills the law and suffers the wages of sin.

Because the third Son has died, the Father says, "You! You prodigals, you tax collectors and sinners who have made a mess of My law and your life, there is no way you can work your way back to holiness. There is no way you can earn your way to be My child. On your own, you will die in the darkness outside. But you are not left to be on your own: My Son, Jesus Christ, has gone to the cross and suffered for all of your sins. I have poured out my wrath upon Him so that I might welcome you. You were not worthy to be called My child, but My Son has given you His worth. Repent of your sins. Repent of your notion that you can work your way in. Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. For in Christ, the sacrifice has been made. Come into the house, stay in the house and come to the meal."

Because the third Son has died, the Father says, "You! You Pharisees and hypocrites who believe that your faint attempts at keeping My law are enough to make you holy, who glance sideways at others in church to feel better about your piety: you're fooling yourself if you think that you can earn a place in My family by your efforts. In fact, you insult My Son by saying that you don't need His death so much as others do: and if you choose to insult My Son, you have no place in My house, and you will die in the darkness outside. But you are not left to be on your own: My Son, Jesus Christ, has gone to the cross and suffered for all of your sins, too. I have poured out my wrath upon Him so that I might welcome you. You were not worthy to be called My child, but My Son has given you His worth. Repent of your sins. Repent of your notion that you can work your way in. Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. For in Christ, the sacrifice has been made. Come into the house, stay in the house and come to the meal."

The day of this world draws near to a close, and you do not want to be caught in the darkness outside when the Lord returns. Abandon all thoughts that you earn your place in the family. Children are not hired, but born; and so you are born again by water and the Word. This is all for the sake of the Son who went to the cross and died for you. For His sake, the Father now says to you, "You are always with Me, and all that I have is yours."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen