

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

Every time we gather to worship, we confess our belief in a Triune God...a God who is the almighty creator of heaven and earth. As we confess this we are stating according to our *Small Catechism* that we believe that God created each and every one of us together with all that exists. We are also confessing that we believe God to be omnipotent, in other words, we believe God to be all-powerful and even invincible because we believe, according to our catechism, God protects us from all danger and evil. But I think where our belief in this omnipotent God stops is when God's unshakable power turns to love. This is where our belief in God falters.

Think not...imagine if you will the most despicable or the most hated person in our culture today...seriously...imagine someone you really don't like or even despise...do you have that person in mind? Now imagine God running out and stumbling across a field having divots and mounds, perhaps getting mud all over his clothes as he runs across that field to greet with great affection this hated and vile person. In this Gospel lesson before us today, this is what Jesus is teaching us about God's gracious love and forgiveness not just for each of us, but those out there who are lost and forgotten, those we really don't like, or even those we consider undeserving of God's grace.

It has been my experience within the church and outside of the church that when it comes to dust-ups that cause divisions or a difference of opinions, no matter what side you are on, God is on our side...and God's judgment and forgiveness is our judgment and forgiveness. This is why this beloved parable is so problematic for us because the father's love and grace is not confined to our judgment and forgiveness. Seeing God from this parable's perspective is difficult. Henri Nouwen gets at the heart of our difficulty with this parable when he wrote:

Maybe the reason it seems hard for me to forgive others is that I do not fully believe that I am a forgiven person. If I could fully accept the truth that I am forgiven and do not have to live in guilt or shame, I would really be free. My freedom would allow me to forgive others seventy times seven times. By not forgiving, I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom.¹

This would certainly explain the grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes that opens our appointed Gospel lesson today, but it might also explain our grumbling about this parable as well. Listen again to the opening of our Gospel lesson and listen to how hard it is for us to forgive as well:

Now all the tax collectors and *sinner*s (*this could be us*) were coming near to listen to him. (*just as we have come today to listen to Christ*)² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2)

After Jesus hears this, he tells the crowd who gathered around him three parables about the lost being found. Jesus is illustrating for the crowds in the form of parables, God's concern for those who lack ability to find God. Jesus is telling the crowds that have come to listen to Him in this Gospel lesson and those listening right now, that God seeks us...God seeks us.

¹ Nouwen, Henri. *The Road to Daybreak, A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1988. This quote was used by William Willimon's commentary on the Fourth Sunday of Lent entitled, "What is God Like?" for Logo's Productions Inc., March 10, 2013.

Jesus is telling us how God's omnipotent LOVE, God's omnipotent compassion and tenderness is extended to all who are in need and not just those we deem worthy...those who have passed our judgments. Herein lies our problem with this parable that is before us today, we don't like God's omnipotent love. We would rather that God's love, compassion, and tenderness have our judgmental restrictions and God's almighty power and wrath destroy those we judge unworthy of God's compassion and forgiveness...you know those who deserve to burn in hell because they wronged us or betrayed us.

You may have or may NOT have noticed that I have not referred to the parable that is in our Gospel lesson today with a title. I do so with good reason, this parable has too many intended meanings to be limited to one title. When we title this particular parable as we have, we limit or contain the text to the title. We know this parable as the parable of "The Prodigal Son," but this parable is not just about one reckless son.² We can title it using the opening line, "There was a man who had two sons" but there is more to the parable than the two sons. We can also title it, "The Prodigal Father," after all, the term prodigal is defined as spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant, or having or giving something on a lavish scale. The father does give his money and his very resources extravagantly and on a lavish scale and some would say wastefully...so perhaps "The Prodigal Father" would work just as well for a title. But in light of what I have personally experienced with the church I can title it, "The Parable of Misunderstood Grace," but I think even more fitting would be, "The Lament of the Responsible Child."³

I'll go with this title because there were some of us at this week's Bible Study who fervently lamented the feeling of the older and more responsible son in this parable. But I like this title too because I believe we as the church have become the older more responsible son. This then begs the question, which son does the father really love? Now we can title this as the parable of "The Faithful Son." The prodigal son returns, but the father loses the older son to his angry self-righteousness and this is where the parable ends.

Once again we have a parable that is not fully resolved. From this unresolved ending, I believe this parable reflects the struggle within the church today. At the heart of this parable are the Pharisees and the Scribes grumbling about Jesus keeping company with sinners. In their grumbling, they believe that Jesus is condoning sin by eating with sinners. Of course, Jesus replies with parables about God rejoicing over found sheep, found coins, and a found child and does not worry about what they did or how they were lost. But the faithful son is left in his self-righteousness that is not resolved and we can say that it lives on in us and the church. How many times in our angry self-righteousness have we felt that the church is condoning the social and political nature of our culture?

Another interesting aspect about this parable that the church can learn from, is that the father runs out to greet the son. Listen to the parable again:

² Van Harn, Roger E. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C written by Roger E. Van Harn, page 407 and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, page 100.

³ The last two titles mentioned are from a podcast from, Sermon Brainwave 1014: Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year C) - March 30, 2025 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/>

²⁰ So [the son] set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

While the son was still far off might tell us that the father was even waiting and searching for him...waiting to see him return home to the father. And before the son even gets a rehearsed word out of his mouth, the father welcomes the son with heartfelt affection. Nonetheless, we the church, like the older son, want penance...we want our pound of flesh. We want sinners like this younger son to pay...if not, we want their heartfelt confession and willingness to pay for all they have done and we certainly do not want a party thrown for them. After all we have been consistent with our attendance, we have worked hard to maintain this place, we have lived a life according to *OUR* understanding of God's law...we want some retribution...we want penance...if they are lost, there is a reason and we want to know that reason.

But here is the problem, God's omnipotent love, God's compassion and forgiveness both fulfills and violates our sense of what is right...violates our self-righteousness. And this is where our omnipotent God fails us, not because God loves us with omnipotent compassion and forgiveness, rather God fails us because God loves those, we feel are undeserving; those who are sinful and need to pay the price.

Within this parable we learn that the father has lost both sons to recklessness...reckless living and spending and reckless self-righteousness. The older self-righteous son wants his father to love him as he feels he deserves to be loved, because he has stayed put, he has followed orders, and he has done all the right things. The older son wants his father to love him for all that he has done and his father DOES love him. The father even says to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." But we need to notice that the father does not love the older son for any of that, any more than he loves the younger prodigal son for what he has done. The father does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. The father just loves them, more because of who he is than because who they are.

Likewise, our Heavenly Father loves each of us, NOT because of who or what we are, our Heavenly Father loves us because of who HE is and because of HIS omnipotent love and grace shown forth in His beloved Son Jesus Christ.⁴ Within this parable the prodigal father JOYFULLY gives up his own rights, even gives up his own dignity, and risks his own future in order to reverse the fate of his sons...just as our Heavenly Father gave up Himself on the cross. The father within the parable reveals and portrays the grace and mercy of the kingdom breaking into our lives through God's actions in Jesus Christ. And once again today, without change, our Heavenly Father gladly invites us to join in the celebration, as he comes to us.

Today our heavenly Father greets us, and embraces us in Word and Sacrament and welcomes us with joy and gladness...you me, all of us are welcomed in our angry self-righteousness, all who have have slaved for God day in and day out...and God welcomes all who have squandered his rich grace on ourselves in dissolute living...we all have returned, and are welcomed to this heavenly celebration of grace and reconciliation given to us in this proclaimed word and in this

⁴ Sections of this sermon are based on Barbara Brown Taylor's commentary entitled "The Prodigal Father" in her book, *The Preaching Life*, Cambridge, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993, pages 162-167.

bread and wine. So as we participate in this Holy Meal may we all rejoice and celebrate with joy knowing that not only does Jesus welcome us sinners to this Holy Eucharist, but he gives to us forgiveness of our sin and a taste of life everlasting. And we know that where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation. Today our heavenly Father comes to us and reassures us that through Jesus Christ He is with us always and all the grace and mercy that is in Jesus Christ is ours. And may we take great joy in knowing that in that grace is life.

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