

TRINITY III – JULY 3, 2022 – LUKE 15:1-32

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

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

“The younger [son] said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.” Thus far our text.

Can you imagine approaching your father or mother right now and asking if you could have your inheritance right now? Wouldn't this be a little bit like saying, “Well, I know that usually inheritances are given out when a person dies, but could we speed this up a little bit?” This would be more than rude – it would be tantamount to wishing that your father or mother were dead already. You just don't ASK for your inheritance – it is something that is given as a free and pure gift, without regard to worthiness to receive it. If our father or mother decided not to leave us their earthly property upon their earthly death, they would not be wrong in this decision, and it would be upon us to accept this, and move on. It's one thing if they decide to be nice to us, and decide to give us our inheritance early, as some parents do when they are downsizing from a home to an apartment; but to ask for it would be considered rude and uncouth.

Our text is filled with examples of sinful behaviors that are over the top. Take the elder son, for example – he was not willing to go into the banquet when his brother returned, because he was angry at his father for not shutting his brother out in the cold. Even when his father came and begged him to go in (which was horribly embarrassing in Jewish culture), the elder son still would not forgive his father or his brother. But, what is most heartening, is that the father is filled with so much mercy and forgiveness, that it makes up for the brothers' bad behaviors. As a type of our heavenly Father, the earthly father of the two brothers is willing to do whatever is necessary in order for his two sons to settle their differences, and to have his family be reunited once again.

Don't we see all of these dynamics taking place in our lives, too? Satan had problems with the heavenly Father, and tempts us then to have difficulties with our father in heaven. Doesn't he whisper in our ears and tug at our hearts to waste the blessings that God has given us, and sin horribly against Him by thought, word and deed. It is easy for us to identify with this type of gross, outward sin – we can see it clearly. But, aren't we also guilty, at one time or another, of being like the elder son? The devil says, "Don't forgive that person. They don't deserve it." That is very appealing to our old Adam. As we journey through this text, we would do well to realize that while we are just as guilty as the brothers of being ungrateful and horribly sinful, our heavenly Father is just as merciful and forgiving toward us, as soon as we repent of our sins and our sinfulness.

Let's start with the prodigal son – his is a story we can all relate to. The young son was impatient with his life, and wanted to move somewhere where the lights were brighter, the grass was greener, and he wouldn't have to be under the "oppressive" thumb of his father any more. After all, who doesn't really want an easy life? Who wants problems in their life? The wayward

son wanted to see everything that there was to see in life, and boy, did he see it! He dreamed about what life must be like on the “wilder side”, and sometimes, the only way that his curiosity could be satisfied was through rebellion and personal experience. All of the warnings in the world didn’t work for him – he have to live it for himself, and learn through the “school of hard knocks” just how hard this life can be.

The younger son’s inheritance must have been rather large, because the Scripture refers to it as wealth that was squandered. But, it didn’t take too much time to go through it. We aren’t told exactly how he wasted his father’s money, but we are told that it was through wild living and immoral activities – we can use our imaginations here. It was probably like a stereotypical fraternity party, except in a much earlier setting – food, drink, women all around him, the whole nine yards. But, eventually, the money ran out, and he began to be in need. Let’s remember this – he had never known want before in his life. Before he left, everything was taken care of by his father, while he was living in his father’s household. After he left, the money lasted for a while, and I’m sure that he continued in the high style of living that he enjoyed while living at his father’s house. Things got so bad that he was reduced to feeding pigs – imagine this for someone who was raised as a Jew, to whom pigs were unfit for eating, because they were unclean! Sin always appears so alluring, so great, but when we get into its throes, the truth is that it always disappoints, always corrupts, and never gives us the joy and happiness that we think that it is going to give us.

It takes a while, but finally, he is moved to confess his sins to his father, and beg him to let him return to his house. He’s had his fun, experienced the pain and disappointment that wild living has to offer, and now is penitent and contrite. He knows that he is no longer fit to be called a son, but wants his father to give him the lesser existence that he gives to his hired men.

At least then he wouldn't be starving, and envious of pigs, who at least had their food needs taken care of. It would be a step down from the position he held before he left, but a giant step up from where he was at the present time. This true contrition is also birthed in us, because we, too, have sinned greatly against heaven and against God Himself. We break His law every day – we don't love our neighbors as ourselves; we don't trust in God above our own knowledge and understanding. The only thing that we can hope for is that God will be merciful and forgive us, and let us back into His presence. No matter what lowly position He decides to give us, it will be much greater than the sinful earthly existence where sin has trapped us, and certainly greater than the condemnation in the fires of hell that awaits us the unrepentant.

All the while, the elder brother doesn't get off "scot free", either. When the prodigal son is off carousing and squandering the father's money, the elder son is working his way into his father's confidence, and doing what he is supposed to do. He works hard, and doesn't even ask for a young goal to celebrate with his friends. He doesn't question his father's authority, and certainly doesn't shame him by asking for his inheritance early, or sully his name by wild living. Needless to say, when the younger brother returns, and the father makes a big deal out of his return, and welcomes him back as his son, the elder brother is quite jealous and put out. He doesn't think that it is fair that he followed all of the rules, and his brother didn't, and yet they seem to have the same outcome in life. He secretly thinks that his brother is pulling the wool over his father's eyes, and has duped him into thinking that he is doing the right thing. Perhaps the elder brother is upset that the younger brother has wasted his own inheritance, and is now starting in on the elder brother's possessions. It is as if he has been disobedient and irresponsible with small things, and now is being given larger things to throw away and waste.

But, the father reminds the elder brother that his attitude is unwarranted, and is sinful and wrong. Even when the father comes out of the house, and pleads with the elder son to go into the party, the elder brother won't do so. His hatred and enmity have gotten the better of him, and he is blinded by his anger. The father reassures the elder son that he is not being marginalized, nor is his loyal service being forgotten. Rather, the father is doing nothing more and nothing less than rejoicing that his youngest son is back from the dead, from the lost, has repented of his many sins, and the relationship between the father and the younger son has been repaired.

But, don't we feel this way a lot? Don't we resent those who don't seem to try very hard in life; we think that "those who work as hard as we do" shouldn't receive the very same reward as those who are disobedient, sinful, and lazy? This makes sense to us, this line of thinking, that those who are much worse sinners than us should receive less than us. This justification of our own sins comes logically to us, because our old Adam secretly want to get into heaven, at least in some small part, because of our perceived good works. It is just as detestable to God to have this arrogance and unwillingness to forgive others, as to live the lawless life of the prodigal son – both are sinful behaviors, and both are deserving of eternal condemnation.

The father in our parable is the most interesting character to study, however. He points ahead to our heavenly Father and His love and mercy. The father in the parable shows unmerited forgiveness and love toward both sons that is completely foreign to us. He breaks all of the ceremonial taboos of the day, and does whatever is necessary to restore his two sons to a full and loving relationship with himself. He allows his younger son to have his inheritance early, and lets him go off and squander it, with the hope that he will see how difficult life is, and come back to him sometime in the future. He runs up to his prodigal son when he sees him returning, because he is so glad that he is safe and coming back to him after all of this time. Even though it

was rather difficult (and perhaps embarrassing) to run in flowing robes, through the mud-caked roads, he did it because of his all-surpassing joy. He goes out to reason with his elder son, outside of his house, even though he shouldn't have had to do this, and it was quite humbling for him to do this. The fact that the elder son refused to go in was an awful slap in the face to both his brother and his father, and without repentance, the father would have been completely justified in ignoring him completely. All of these things the father did because he loved his sons, and wanted the best for them, and wanted them to return to him, and be his children once again.

Even though the malady of the sons is also our malady, God still comes to you, and forgives you, and restores you to full fellowship with Himself. He broke all convention, and humbled Himself in the most horrifying way – He came down from heaven – FOR YOU! He gave up the glories of heaven for a while, for the simple reason that He wanted us to be there later with Him. He allowed Himself to undergo scourging and crucifixion, the most horrible and painful death imaginable, and allowed Himself to be cursed along with the worst criminals by dying in this way. He did all this out of His love for you. He continually urges us to confess our sins, and come to Him for the forgiveness that we need more than life itself, and rejoices when we do indeed confess our sins, and blesses us with His holy Absolution.

Jesus came for you from heaven – He's the fattened calf in Jesus' parable. Because they killed the fattened calf for the celebration, they are able to rejoice and be merry. Notice here that there are three gifts that the father gives to the son, that are a result of the fattened calf being killed, just as Jesus was killed on the tree of the cross. The father gave the son shoes once again – no longer are you who are redeemed in Christ slaves, but you are regarded by God as sons. The son was given the ring, to mark him as a son to anyone who noticed it. Where do we see rings today? Married couples – they wear a ring to mark them as espoused to another. The son

was given the ring by the father to make sure that people knew that he was restored to being the son, and not just a slave, as the son was willing to be. The father also bestowed upon the prodigal son the robe that marked him as part of the family once again. You also are given the robe of Christ's righteousness in Baptism, when your sins are washed away, you are given the gift of faith, and marked with the sign of the cross as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. This connection to Jesus is often missed in this passage, but when you dig into it a little bit, it's not hard to find Him. That's the way that Scripture is – Christ is the KEY to understanding the Bible, all over the place.

In addition, God gives you the rewards of living in His palace in heaven, just like the father in the parable gave his prodigal son the clothing and accoutrements that belonged only to heirs. Our Father in heaven gives you the “bread of angels” to eat and drink in the Sacrament of the Altar. He gives you the words of eternal life in His sacred Scriptures, so that you can be comforted by His love to His children over the ages, and be knowledgeable about the salvation and life eternal that He died and rose again to give you. On the Last Day, He will clothe you with the righteousness of Christ, in the same way that the father clothed his prodigal son with the robes that were fit for a king.

The parable of the prodigal son is illustrative of many aspects of our existence here in this sinful world. But, thanks be to God that our heavenly Father is more loving and more forgiving than the father in the parable, if that were possible. Indeed, it is only possible with God, and not with sinful men. He forgives your sins, welcomes you back to Himself with open arms, and rejoices when you come back to Him, through the urging of the Holy Spirit. He is able to rest and be content knowing that His children have returned to Him, and has been intimately involved with their return. He humbled Himself on the cross, and died and rose again in your place, so

that His perfect blood would substitute for the death that was necessary for your sins. He gives you the glorious riches of heaven when our earthly lives are over, and gives you a foretaste of them even today in His Word and His Sacraments. We are abundantly blessed by God every day, solely because of His love and His mercy, and certainly not because of anything that we have done to deserve them. Amen.

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

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.