

Theme: Unconditional forgiveness

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we give you thanks and praise for your extravagant love: help us to be worthy of your love and forgiveness that we may, in turn, forgive others, through him who taught us to love unconditionally, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son in the key of "F."

Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow

Forced his fond father to fork over the farthings.
And flew far to foreign fields
And fabulously frittered his fortune with faithless friends.
Fleeced by his fellows in folly, and facing famine,
He found himself a feed-finder in a filthy farmyard.
Fairly famishing, he fain would've filled his frame,
With foraged food from fodder fragments.
"Fooy, my father's flunkies fair far finer,"
The frazzled fugitive forlornly fumbled, frankly facing facts.
Frustrated by failure, and filled with foreboding,
He fled forthwith to his family.
Falling at his father's feet, he forlornly fumbled, "Father, I've
Flunked, and fruitlessly forfeited family fellowship favor,"
The farsighted father, forestalling further flinching,
Frantically flagged the flunkies.
"Fetch a fatling from the flock and fix a feast."
The fugitive's fault-finding brother frowned
On fickle forgiveness of former folderol.
But the faithful father figured,
"Filial fidelity is fine, but the fugitive is found!
What forbids fervent festivity?
Let the flags be unfurled! Let fanfares flare"
Father's forgiveness formed the foundation
For the former fugitive's future fortitude!

Jesus was traveling along the countryside gathering large crowds anxious to hear him. Included in the crowd were tax collectors and sinners. Jesus had a

message for people wanting to change their lives. And who is a sinner? In the Bible, a sinner is one who engages in idolatry, in other words one who worships something other than God. A sinner may also be one who engages in apostasy, in other words, denying the truth you already know.

The Pharisees were not pleased with the company that Jesus kept. After all, if Jesus wants to be one of them, he will have to stop hanging out with the less desirables. We know that good people hang out with good people and bad people hang out with bad people. One sure way to get into trouble is to hang out with bad people. Jesus must want to do bad things. Just look at the people he pals around with!

The scribes also joined the criticism saying Jesus not only welcomes sinners, but he even will eat with them! How disgusting! The Greek conveys the utter disdain they had for Jesus. It is amazing how these people, in their self-righteousness, are so totally blind to their own faults. Jesus responds, as he often does to criticism, by telling parables.

Jesus tells the people three parables about the lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Jesus' point for his critics to hear is: for the first parable, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who turns to God than those who do not need to. For the second parable, Jesus says that the angels rejoice when even *one* person turns to God.

What follows next in Luke, is one more lost story. That third story is more powerful than the other two and should really drive Jesus' point home. It is one of the most famous parts of the Bible. It is well known, because it is so powerful.

It was customary in Jesus' time when there is more than one son in the family, that the oldest son receives the bulk of the inheritance and the other sons split up what is left. In this case, the oldest son will receive two-thirds of the father's property and the younger son one-third. Even with one-third, the younger son gets a lot. The father is very rich.

No son would ever dare to ask for their inheritance before the father's death. This son not only dares ask, but he demands. Being an oldest son myself, I'm not sure what this says about younger sons in family systems – or do I?

What is even more astounding is that the father does what the younger son demands. Talk about spoiled enabling!

The younger son had an agenda – party time! Wine, women and song! I don't know about songs, but wine and women can get expensive. (But you can get good deals at local wineries.) The younger son manages to spend it all. With all his extravagance, he fails to make one good friend. People like him for his money and not for him as a person. When everything is gone, he has no one to turn to.

We assume the family in this parable are Jews. Certainly the audience were all Jews. This makes what happens next most demeaning. The younger son is able to find one job – slopping pigs. This makes him ritually unclean. No Jew could get close to him. Now, my great-uncle was a pig farmer. I suspect that that was the family business when he and my grandmother arrived in this country from England. So, not all pig farmers are bad.

The younger son was not paid enough to avoid starvation. It is as if this younger son did things that these gentile people he is living among could not stand. They hate him. The only job they will give him is an extremely low-paying, demeaning job.

Like someone who is a substance abuser, he hits his low point. Jesus says he “came to himself.” The younger son realizes that his life is askew. He also realizes that he needs to fix it. He realizes that his life was not as it should be. He will swallow his pride, face the humiliation, and hire himself out as a slave or a servant to his father. His survival depends on it. He would rather eat even if it means public humiliation for the rest of life. He rehearses his apology speech.

When the father sees his youngest son in the distance, he does something that is counter-cultural. He runs to his son. This is just not done in that culture. In addition, the father is prohibited from touching someone who worked with pigs. Compassion drives the father. The younger son begins his apology speech to his father when his father cuts him off and orders a grand feast.

The father knew. The father turns out to be wiser than we thought. He sent off a self-absorbed, self-centered, young man. A humble, seasoned, contrite

man returns home. This is cause for a celebration! The father's younger son finally grew up!

The older son has been ignored in this story up to now. He feels that he has been ignored by his father. This son will now say his peace. The younger sons' activities were known back home. The responsible son resented the way his brother celebrated and squandered an unearned inheritance.

This brings up the issue of justice. If someone does something wrong, there should be consequences. The older son wants justice. Rewarding bad behavior is not just. And to rub salt in the wound of the older brother, the father is squandering the older son's inheritance on an irresponsible son. It is doubly insulting. It is not right.

The father understands what his older son is feeling. He tries to make him understand why this party is justified. His brother was irresponsible, but now is responsible. His brother was arrogant, but now is humble. His brother did not respect God, but now has found religion. His brother was dead to us, but now he is alive. His brother was lost, but is now found.

Jesus leaves the story there. It is up to our imaginations on what the self-righteous brother does next. Does he join the party? Does he stay outside the house, moping? Does he get an AK-47 and take everyone out? For every one of us with some self-righteous, Pharisaic blood flowing in our veins, this is a question for us to answer. What is the just thing to do?

Jesus is inviting the Pharisees to accept the invitation to the party celebrating the finding of the lost. Jesus' point is that in gathering sinners around him, we are joining the angels in their party in heaven. The prodigal's older brother has the same contempt as the Pharisees do. Why would anyone refuse to celebrate with God? I think, only someone who is so sure of their own righteousness that God's love and acceptance is unacceptable.

So where are we at parable's end? Are we inside the party celebrating? Or are we standing outside with our arms folded, refusing to come in? Jesus will not tell us how this story will end. The father passionately invites the older son inside, "pleads with him" to join in the welcome. Curiously, however, we are never told what the older brother decides to do. The story

ends but it doesn't end. You can almost hear the voice of Walter Cronkite saying, "You are there."

Will we RSVP to a party thrown by an unfair God? Or will we stubbornly remain outside? In a world where God does not play fair, this parable forces us to make a choice. Who is the real "prodigal" here? Who is the real "waster"? From the beginning Jesus says that this is a story about two brothers. Which one is the authentic prodigal? Which one has yet to come home to the Father's extravagant love?

Text: **Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32** (NRSV)

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable:

^{11b} "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he 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. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "