

St. Paul Lutheran Church
Grant Park, Illinois
The Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one 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.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he 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. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, '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!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

There are certain things in life which hurt. Slipping and falling on ice while rolling an ankle or breaking an arm? Ouch. No argument here. That hurts. Your favorite team losing the biggest game you've ever watched them play? Yep, it hurts. Getting dumped by someone you're sure is the one? Crushed feelings really really hurt. There are many things in life which hurt. Sometimes the hurt is physical (i.e. rolling an ankle or breaking a bone) while other times it is emotional (i.e. your team losing or getting dumped).

We all get hurt in life. It might be physical or it might be emotional. How does one get past the hurt? Time often helps. Rolled ankles and broken bones heal. It may take some time and therapy to get strength back, but they do heal. Your favorite team always has next year. Ice cream, Netflix, tears, hugs and finding someone new does help you move on from the one who broke your heart, but one thing life teaches you is there are events in life which leave scars that never really heal.

What are such events in life which can leave scars that have a hard time healing? Our gospel lesson introduces us to one such event. **“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one 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.”**

Jesus tells us a story about a certain man who had two sons. He spends the first part of the story focusing on the younger son and the hurt which he inflicted on his father. The younger son in the story follows a familiar path. He is young, immature and feels like living at home with his dad is putting a damper on his ability to have fun. He decides to come up with a rather bold plan. He asks his dad to cash out his inheritance early so he can go sow his wild oats.

Can you imagine what the request must have done to his father? Raising children is hard because you put them first in everything you do. They come into the world helpless and totally dependent on you to feed, clothe, bath and keep them safe. Parents sacrifice sleep to soothe crying kids at night. They put their children's needs ahead of their own personal enjoyment. They worry about the choices which their children make and who they will become.

The father had put in x amount of years into raising his son. He had done everything he could to provide and take care of his son and how does the son respond? Dad, I wish you were dead. Pretty hard thing to hear from your child, isn't it? I wish you were dead. Words which leave scars so deep that no amount of time would ever be able to heal them. This is the pain and hurt the younger son inflicts into his father.

Some of you know how bad the father hurt in our story. Your children (or a sibling or a parent) have by their words or actions have suggested they would rather think of you as dead than alive. The silent scars your heart bears are deeper than the Grand Canyon. Your pillow has been wet by enough tears to fill an ocean. Your knees are knobbed and calloused because you've spent so much time in prayer asking God to bring your child to their senses and restore them to you.

The path the younger son takes is familiar and well-worn because many younger people have chaffed at authority and jumped at the chance to sow their wild oats. **“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.”

The younger son goes out and lives it up for a while. However, his world eventually comes crashing down all around him. The money runs out. He ends up homeless and starving because of his foolish choices.

Sadly, the younger son isn't the only one who makes foolish choices in life. You and I often make foolish choices too. It might be wild living like excessive partying, drinking or sex. It might be abusing a parent's love. It could be any number of things, but all of these sinful choices have one thing in common. They send a loud and clear message to God, "I wish you were dead, because I hate the limits you put on my life. I want the freedom to make my choices the way I want."

Is this the message you really want to send to your heavenly Father? The same Father who provides for you. Who promises he is with you every twist and turn in your life? Each one of us knows what it is like to be hurt. Some of you know what it is like to have a child turn their back on you, while each one of us can relate to the hurt. Do you really want to be the source of the pain? The hurt? Or has it hit you just how offensive to God your sinful choices are? Where do you turn when it all sinks in?

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father. But while he 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. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

The younger son ultimately realized his sinful choices had cost him a loving relationship with his father, but he also knew his father loved him. His father's love drew him back home. He confessed his sins and his father forgave him. He rejoiced because his son had been led to see the error of his ways. It was a day he had been waiting for since the day the younger son left home. It is a beautiful picture of forgiveness for people who have succumbed to sin.

What should you do when you realize you're a sinner? Follow the example of the younger son. You can remember the way your heavenly Father loves you. He has created you, provided for you and cared for you even when you turned your back on him, but this isn't the only way he has loved you. He has loved you with a perfect love. Your sins are deeply offensive to him. They hurt and scar, but in love he has forgiven you for the wrong you have done.

It cost him dearly to forgive you and me for the wrong we have done. He sent his own son into this world to live as one of us. He sent him to resist the urges to rebel against authority and by doing so he could put back together the pieces of a parent's broken heart. He lived according to God's perfect will because imperfect people could not live according to it, but that isn't all. Jesus willingly displayed the full extent of God's love for sinners when he took the punishment we deserve for sins.

The reason there was rejoicing in the house was because the younger son was led back to the understanding there is forgiveness with God. There is just as much rejoicing in heaven when we are led to understand again and again the forgiving love which our heavenly Father has for us. It is a love which forgives the hurt which you and I inflicted on him and no longer holds it against us because of Jesus.

Yet, does the Father's love all seem a bit easy? A bit too perfect? **"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him."**

"But he answered his father, '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!'" We need to remember there were two brothers in the house. The older son was the model son. He stayed home. He worked hard. He didn't go off to sow his wild oats.

Yet, did this son appreciate his father's love? Not really. What was his reaction when he found out his brother came home? He got angry because his dad loved his brother. The older son's reaction is telling because it shows he didn't appreciate his father's love. The older son thought his father's love was based on the fact he was the model son rather than based in his father. How do we know this is the case? Look at the bitter reaction the older son has when he found out his dad still loved his brother.

It isn't hard to imagine what the older brother's face looked like. All beet red and twisted in anger. You can just picture the older son yelling the words, "You treated me as a slave. I never disobeyed. I never goofed off. I did what you wanted and never even got a thank you! Yet, what do you do for this worthless brother of mine who wasted all your things on prostitutes? You show him love! You honor him! You reject me! It isn't fair."

What was the older brother's main problem with his father? Isn't it he didn't understand the reason his father loved him? The older son assumed his father loved him because he was the good and dutiful son. Yet, his father's love for his younger son exposed his older son to a reality he didn't want to believe. His father loved him not because he had been so faithful, but because he loved him with a father's love.

What can you and I take away from the older son? The older son's reaction exposes a temptation which faces any Christian. What is it? The temptation is to base God's love for us in ourselves rather than believing the real reason God loves us which is based in God himself and not at all in us. What is a good

test for us to help us evaluate if we've fallen victim to this horrible temptation? Well, how do you view others who aren't like you and how do react when God does something you don't like?

Do you turn up your nose at someone because they are a bit rough around the edges? Are you surprised God actually welcomes sinners like prostitutes, thieves and crooked politicians into his family? Do you wonder why God allows you to suffer health issues even though you've his model follower all your earthly days? Do you struggle with these things? Could the reason for your struggle be that you have based God's love in yourself rather than his love in him?

Why do we need to understand God's love is based in him and not in us? **“My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”** It helps us appreciate how much our father loves sinners like us. You and I are not perfect, but we don't need to be. God's love is based in him and he forgives all people. Even stubborn life-long church members. Amen.