

Rev. Gregory Gibbons
Lola Park Lutheran Church
Redford, MI 48239

Luke 15:1-3, 25-32
SEE THE FATHER'S LAVISH LOVE (PART II)

INI

Last Sunday I had the privilege of preaching on one of my favorite texts, the story of the Prodigal or Lost Son. It is a story that can bring tears to one's eyes. It is a story of God's grace. The younger son did his absolute best to make himself unlovable. He was not at all happy or content at home. He wanted his inheritance and he wanted it now. He basically was asking for his father's death so that he could have the money. The father granted his son's request and split up his estate. The younger son went out hoping that life would be one continual party. And it was for a while. And then the money ran out. And when the money ran out, so did his friends and girlfriends. He squandered everything he had in wild living. He found a job feeding pigs and hit rock bottom, since even the pigs were eating better than he was.

He came to his senses. He realized that he didn't have it so bad at home after all. He realized his unworthiness. He hoped that somehow his father would take him back, not as a son, but rather as a hired hand and somehow this son could work his way back into his father's good graces. It was not going to work. The father is the central figure in this story. He does not deal with his son in justice or even mercy. He deals with him in grace. The father runs out to his son as he sees him. Before the prodigal can even confess his unworthiness, the father brings out a robe, a ring, and sandals. He calls for a feast and a public celebration. The whole community is invited. This was a time for rejoicing. His son was lost and now was found. His son was dead and now is alive.

Is there anyone who would not be moved by this beautiful story of love? Is there anyone who would be overjoyed by the final outcome? Yes, there was. There were a number of people who were not happy with the outcome then and there are a number of people who are not happy with that outcome today. We will see them in the second half of the story as we SEE THE FATHER'S LAVISH LOVE (PART II).

Remember that as Jesus told this story, he was telling it to two distinct groups of people. First of all, you had the outcasts, the tax collectors and the sinners who were rejected for their sinful lifestyle. Jesus gave them life and hope by assuring them of the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus didn't tell them that they should live their lives any way that they wanted because it didn't matter. Rather he gave them the power to turn from their sins by trusting in him. We think of people like Mary Magdalene, Matthew, Zacchaeus, and the woman taken in adultery. They would have new lives, changed lives. Their lives would never be the same again.

On the other hand, you had the Pharisees and teachers of the law who seethed with bitterness and rage as they saw Jesus not only talking with such people, but also eating with them. How could Jesus accept such people? They questioned everything about Jesus including his judgments and his authority to forgive sins. They would have a decidedly different reaction to this story and the actions of the father.

"There was a man who had two sons." We saw the prodigal last week. We focus our attention on the other this morning. He wondered what was going on. He heard the sound of music, dancing, and celebration. He saw people coming to his house. He knew that he had not planned anything. His father had not mentioned anything to him. It finally struck him that there could be only one reason for such a thing. His father had planned a surprise party to honor him. And it wasn't even his birthday! Oh, well, he certainly deserved it for being such a good son, unlike his good-for-nothing brother.

Can you imagine the look on his face when one of the servants told him the real reason for the celebration? “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.” He couldn’t believe his ears. This had to be some kind of a cruel joke! As the servant used the words “your brother” and “your father” he spoke with a straight face. It was no joke. It was real. The servant intimated that the only thing needed to make the celebration complete was for him to go in and join the feast. The whole family would be back together again. Yep, just one big happy family!

The chances of him going in and doing that were slim and none, and slim just left town. He stayed outside. His anger was growing by the minute. You could have fried an egg on his forehead. All those years of staying home and working for his father while his good-for-nothing brother went out and spent his share of the inheritance. His brother comes home and now his father has a feast ...for him? It was very clear that the feast was the problem.

We can certainly imagine the Pharisees and teachers of the law nodding their heads in agreement. They understood the second son completely. They would do the very same thing. Why would he go in and join the feast? He would be putting his stamp of approval on his father’s foolish actions. Why would he forgive his younger brother? He certainly didn’t deserve forgiveness. And he certainly didn’t deserve a feast in his honor! Why didn’t the father put all kinds of conditions on this son, making him jump through all kinds of hoops until he proved himself worthy, which of course he never would? The teachers of the Law were the ones who kept God’s holy law or so they thought. They were the ones who debated every fine point while the tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners showed that they did not deserve God’s favor and never would.

The father was the wild card in this story. He showed amazing patience and love for his younger son. He will show the same here. The older son will not come in and join the feast. This is a public insult. The father wanted to receive his younger son back publicly. The older son will reject his father publicly. The younger son did not have to say a word, but the older son would have plenty to say. The disgust and displeasure was easy to read on his face. Just as the father had run out to receive his younger son, so the father will go out to his older son and plead with him.

“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!” Well, that was quite an earful! One theologian counted seven different insults in that response. It is very clear that there were two lost sons. The break in the relationship between the father and his older son is nearly as great as the break between the father and the younger son at the beginning of the story. We see just how ugly self-righteousness can be.

Let’s look at the charges. He does not even address his father with any kind of respect. He speaks of himself as a slave working for his father all those years. Remember that the father had divided his estate. The older son would receive a double portion of it. That’s hardly being a slave. He claims never to have disobeyed a single one of his father’s orders. That is one of the traits of self-righteousness. It likes to use the words “always” and “never” and believes that they are true. Even if that was true, did he always do so in a loving spirit, never once complaining? I don’t think so.

He accuses his father of favoritism, saying that his father had never even given him a goat to celebrate. He lived at home. He had everything. He had the double portion of the inheritance. Joy was not going to be a reunion with his brother. Joy was eating a goat with his friends. Finally, he attacks his younger brother accusing him of cavorting with prostitutes, which may or may not have been true. Since he did not talk with his younger brother, he was guilty of breaking the eighth Commandment, by not taking his brother’s words and actions in the kindest possible way. He did not take his father’s words and actions in the kindest possible way. Yes, this son was also lost even though he was living in the father’s house the whole time!

We once again see the incredible patience and love of the father in our story. Even though he was insulted and disrespected, he would deal with the same compassion he had for his younger son. "My son, 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."

All of us are by nature selfish, very selfish. We think of ourselves as deserving. We think of others as not deserving. We see it in families all the time. We don't like to look at what we have. We like to look at what others have and what we don't have. Then we complain that life is unfair. The truth is that life is unfair! We don't deserve anything, especially from God. Everything that we have is a gift from God's grace.

This was a time for joy. The whole community was there, enjoying the feast. There was only one person missing. Would he join the party? Would he go into the feast? Would he be reconciled to his brother? Would he apologize to his father? The father loved both his sons with an amazing love. He loved them with all their faults and sins.

The beauty of the parable is that we do not know how it ends. Did the older son go into the feast? Did he pack his bags and leave his father's house as well, vowing never to see his father or brother again? Did he pray for his father's death? Did he go through the rest of his life with a heart filled with hate and resentment for both his father and brother? We don't know. The more important question would be, "What about me?"

We know how the Pharisees felt. This was one more nail in Jesus' coffin or cross if you will. They would take care of the matter when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He might come into the city, but he wasn't going to leave it alive (or so they thought).

Do you side with the older brother or with the father? Do you see yourself as the prodigal son who deserved only his father's wrath and punishment, but received the very opposite of what he deserved? Do you see your sins that separated you from God? Do you see why Jesus had to come into this world for you? Do you see why he had to suffer and die for you? Do you see why he had to rise from the dead for you? Do you see what a joy it is to come to the Lord's house and receive God's forgiveness through Word and Sacrament? Do you rejoice as you hear the stories of the Prodigal Son and dying thief on the cross?

Or do you view things differently? Do you think that God is very fortunate that you took the time to come here? Do you feel that you deserve God's love a lot more than some of the other people sitting in these pews? Let's face it. We are all Pharisees by nature. We have to fight that battle against self-righteousness every day. Satan will always be hard at work. He will either try to get us to think that we don't need Jesus as our Savior, or he will convince us that our sin is too great, and that Jesus would not forgive us for what we have done. God loves us all. He has called us all by grace. He invites us to the heavenly feast. We will either go in or stand outside pouting. The choice is yours. AMEN.