

## Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

<sup>1</sup>Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable: <sup>11b</sup>“There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>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! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ‘ <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>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.’ <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>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.’ ”

Dear disciples of Jesus,

It is difficult for us to see something new in the parable of the Prodigal son. We have heard the story so many times that we tend to believe that we have squeezed it dry of meaning. Not only that, but, as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. When we hear the opening words of the parable once again, "And there was a Father who had two sons," we greet the words with ho-hum. Heard it. Heard it. Heard it.

“In 1986 Henri Nouwen, a Dutch theologian and writer, toured St. Petersburg, Russia, the former Leningrad. While there he visited the famous Hermitage museum where he saw, among other things, Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting was in a hallway and received the natural light of a nearby window. Nouwen stood for two hours, observing this remarkable painting. As he stood there the sun changed, and at every change of the light's angle he saw a different aspect of the painting revealed. He would later write: "There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, I would suggest that just as Henri Nouwen saw a half dozen different perspectives to Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son, so there are also there many different angles to the story itself. This morning I would like for us to re-examine this familiar story by looking at the other prodigal son.

The prodigal son himself is well known to us all. Restless, impatient for his future happiness, he comes and demands from the father that which he thought was rightfully his. He took his money and journeyed to a far country where he wastes it. He wastes the money, wastes his life, and finally ended up doing the

---

<sup>1</sup> Commentary <http://www.sermons.com/>

most indignant task that a Jew could do--the feeding of swine. It was then that Jesus says that he came to himself. He arises from his situation and goes back to the father to ask to be a servant in his household. And even as he was a long distance away the father saw him and ran out with outstretched arms to greet him. As the story concludes we have the makings of a grand homecoming party.

It was at this point that Jesus shifts the story and begins talking about the older brother.

I believe that the older brother is the other prodigal son of our Gospel story. Let me tell you why.

The Gospel parable says that the older brother angry for the celebration of his brother returned and complained to his father saying:

*“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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”*

Let us analyze his statement:

He said “I have been working like a slave for you..”

A slave was not considered a person, slaves were property, objects that could be traded. When he declared that he was working as a slave, he was affirming that he was just like an object for his father, an object used to produce profit. He definitely felt alienated by his father, but was he really a slave and object for his father? Or maybe the older son was just living under a wrong perception of his

role and place in the house of his father. He reduced his life to work like a slave, he did not discover the joy of life as the first son of his father.

Secondly, he said “ I have never disobeyed your command...”

With this statement the older son demonstrated that he understood his relationship with his father as a relationship of power and obedience. He revealed that his understanding of the parent-child relationship was legalistic and not based on love. This is a very important observation. Remember that Jesus was frequently fighting the legalism of the Pharisees and Scribes that always understood the relationship with God as obedience of the law. For the Pharisees’ spirituality there is not a love relationship only a legalistic one of complete obedience of the law. The older son represents the frustration of a child that misunderstood the relationship with God as only legalistic obedience of the law forgetting that God is love and that the father-son relationship should be based on the unlimited love of God and not on submission to the law.

Thirdly “ You have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate...”

This statement revealed that the older son considered that he was not rewarded for his service to the father, that he worked as a slave but he did not have any recognition for his service. He expected recognition and reward. Again this is a direct critique of the Pharisaic understanding of how our relationship with God should be. The Pharisees expected recognition and reward for their obedience to the law. They have a cause-effect understanding of piety. They lived under the logic of if I do this, God should reward me with this. And if God is not rewarding the older son according his expectations, he complained against God and considered that God was not fair.

Fourthly he affirmed “But when this son of yours came back...”

The final statement is even worse. The older son complained that the father received and welcomed the younger brother. He was angry because under his understanding of life, his brother should have been excluded from the family tree forever.

This is again another direct attack of Jesus against the legalistic piety of the Pharisees, because under their legalistic point of view, the world was divided into two different kinds of people: the ones that are clean and pure and the others that are unclean and excluded.

From a Pharisee perspective the younger brother should be excluded from grace and reward, he should be considered dead and forgotten. That is why the idea that the father could receive him back home and welcome him with a party was abhorrent for the older son.

You see, the older son in the parable also represented a different kind of spirituality. He represented the Pharisaic understanding of the law that understood our relationship with God only as religious legalism based on a merit-reward doctrine, and on a clean versus impure spirituality that excluded any possibility of mercy to anyone that left the legalistic system of merit-reward and purity and impurity distinction.

But the father's answer really explains the terrible mistake in which the older brother was living. The father answered:

*'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'*

This amazing statement of Jesus was a radical rejection of the whole Pharisaic spirituality.

Jesus was saying, using the words of the father in the parable, that the older son never needed to work as a slave or consider himself as a slave, because he was the co-owner of all the household.

Jesus is affirming that his followers as citizens of the Kingdom are now the ones who have the Kingdom and can enjoy that reality, if they do not do it, that is because they do not understand the real meaning of what is a child of God.

As the owner of the household, the older son was in a position of authority, his father shared that authority with him, he could make decisions, he could command others. But he did not do it. The idea that he only had to follow orders was not part of Jesus' spirituality. Jesus is declaring that our relationship with God is not a legalistic one but one based on love. We are always with the Father and all what the Father owns is also ours.

On the other hand, the older son complained that his father never gave him a goat to celebrate with his friends, but the reality was that he could celebrate anytime because he could take a goat if he wanted to do so. Jesus said that this is not a merit and reward spirituality, our spirituality is one based on understanding that we are the owners of all the blessings and promises of God not depending on our merits, our spirituality on the grace of God that graciously wants to give us everything.

And finally, the older son considered that his father's son was not anymore his own brother. He said "when this son of yours came back..." He did not say when my brother came back!

He also forgot the meaning of being a son and a brother. Jesus is teaching us that we are brothers and sisters and we are always united and walking together, and that brokenness and distance can be overcome if we live in Christ.

Who was the prodigal son then?

The younger one who traveled to a distant country and there he squandered his property in dissolute living or the older one who stayed at home but never understood that he could always enjoy the presence of his father and he chose to live as a slave without enjoying the authority that his father gave him, and never used the blessings that he received from his father to celebrate with his friends and, finally, never reckoned himself as a son of his father.

In other words, the older brother was also a prodigal son because he wasted his life without enjoying the blessings that his position as son of the father offered him. His brother wasted the money that his father gave him, but the older son wasted the love, authority, blessings and possessions that his father gave him. He had everything but he never used and enjoyed it.

Now that we are walking with Jesus during this Lenten season, this parable may appear challenging to analyze considering that like the older brother, we have the blessing to live with the father, to be part of the church, to have the freedom to worship God every day and gather here together as the body of Christ that receives the word and the sacraments.

We have the blessings of God and the opportunities to serve God in gratitude, likewise we can learn more about God's word and practice the spiritual habits of Jesus. So, are we actually enjoying this incredible opportunity? Or many times we are so confused or just forget them and ended up living like the older brother who had everything but enjoyed nothing.

“When someone asked Martin Luther how they might be confident that they are Christian, Luther replied, all you need to know is that you are baptized! A Christian is someone who by water and the word has been given a new life in

God's eternal family through the indwelling power of Christ's death and resurrection."<sup>2</sup>

We are baptized: like the older son of the parable, we are living with the father and through baptism we have received all the blessings of the father's house and we can enjoy God's daily presence in our life through word and sacrament, through prayer and service and through fellowship and worship. We have all these blessings, now we just need to remember and to live the power of those blessings.

They are here for us, we don't need to earn them, they are here and we can enjoy them and use them to proclaim the Gospel and reach more people with the Good News. Unfortunately, the church around the world is sleeping or ignoring this wonderful reality. Unfortunately, there are millions of Christians around the world that need to awake and discover that we are here with the mission to bring justice, love and reconciliation, to be the voice of the one in need, to be the hand of God touching the poor comforting the broken hearted, to be the mouth that says a prayer for others, to be the heart that ponders the wonderful revelations of God.

We are here and we are invited to remember the same words that the father said to the older son: *'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'*

We can say yes to our Father in heaven, we can trust in his love, we can be thankful and live a life of gratitude. God is with us and all that is God's possession is now in Christ ours too.

Remember, you are a baptized Child of God and you can be thankful. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Seven Habits of Jesus. P. 289