

The Fourth Sunday in Lent – 2022

Isaiah 12:1-6

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“Hey, what’s with the music? That’s not right. There’s nothing on the calendar. We only hire the band when there’s a big event. What the heck? No one told me about a party.” The older son trudges in from the field wondering what’s the deal. Pretty soon he’s going to be flamed out. “You’re what? For him? Are you kidding me?”

The long and short of it is that grace flames some people out, upsets them, and their anger is ultimately directed against the One who dispenses such grace. Some folks’ religious sensibilities are set on edge by this parable, the parable of the Prodigal Son, or you could call it the parable of the Loving Father, or even the parable of the Elder Brother. Whatever you call it, the parable, as vivid as it is, is just a segue to something still more vivid. Crucifixion, forgiveness, and life for sinners in Christ’s church – that is the vivid image that has taken this world by storm.

Do you know any sinners? I know one or two. Jesus was eating with sinners. The worst kind; dirty, low, despicable types. To some, it was unseemly. The religiously proper were in a twist. Jesus was, in fact, a sinner magnet. They were coming from all quarters, drawing near to hear Him. “And both the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, saying ‘This man welcomes sinners *and eats with them*’” (Luke 15:2). It was habitual, this dining with lowlifes. Repeatedly, as a custom, the Lord Christ would break bread with ne’er-do-wells.

The self-righteous didn’t know what they were witnessing. To them it was just a rabbi condoning the ill behavior of city scum. Does grace really condone bad behavior? Those peoples’ religious ideals were fairly simple; in a nutshell: One must earn God’s favor. A respectable God loves respectable people. Simple indeed; shallow as milk in a saucer. So, for them, a decent rabbi just wouldn’t eat with sinners.

Comes now the story; teaching of the highest order; a glimpse into your Father’s heart. “A certain man had two sons, and the younger of them said to the father, ‘Father, give to me the portion of the property that falls to me.’ And he divided to them the estate.”

Right away, death is at the center of this parable. The property would ordinarily only be dispensed upon the death of the father. The younger son basically asks his father to die, and the father complies. Outrageous! A selfish son who wants his father’s cash in his own pocket so that he can indulge himself... and his request is honored. What an ingrate! What a defiant and narcissistic ingrate! That is what a sinner is, by the way – corrupt in heart and mind, curved in on himself. Doing whatever pleases self irrespective of how it hurts others. You know the flavor of that soup for it has been in your mouth often. None are immune from the merciless accusation of the law: “There is no one righteous; no, not even one” (Romans 3:10). It is only the sick who need a physician and God’s Word diagnoses us aright: we are sick. It is universally true; “there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Categorically, you are no different from the younger son. Your Father’s love you have

abused. You have disregarded His Word and served yourself. There is only one word to speak in response to this: repent.

The Son needed cash. Think of it; he had to turn this property into cash before he went on his escapades. Scouring the community for a fence, someone unscrupulous enough to turn his property into liquid capital – imagine how he would be viewed. “You did *what* to your father?” “You want me to do *what*?” As he goes from one prospective buyer to another, the intensity of the community’s hatred and disgust mounts. At every turn he is greeted with amazement, horror, and rejection (K. Bailey).

Is it a surprise that such an individual becomes destitute? He lived “extravagantly.” In a far country, he squandered his property in reckless living. Not sure what that means – and that is precisely what Jesus intends. It doesn’t say that he lounged in an opium den in Afghanistan or that he consorted with Vivian from *Pretty Woman* in Beverly Hills. It does say that he disgraced himself, rendering himself unclean and that he hits bottom. And he remembers. He remembers light and hope and security and love. He remembers His Father and His Father’s house. He returns.

Jesus, the sinner magnet, was telling all people about coming home. All sinners have a home. Grace, a blood-bought forgiveness, is for anybody and everybody. Plenty of derelicts were coming home. And the Father was overjoyed. In the parable, the father sees his prodigal son far off, and he runs. The dismal figure of the wayward son is on the horizon and the father *runs* to embrace his son, whom he loves. It is the Father’s love which is the star of the parable. It gladly dies; it forgives 70x70 times; it pays the worker who only worked one hour as much as those who worked all day; it leaves 99 sheep and goes looking for the one lost sheep – no matter what dark alleyway it got lost in. *That* is your Heavenly Father. You; you are the beloved son, the beloved daughter. God’s love for you was there *before* you turned to Him. Indeed, it is only that love that makes it possible for you *to turn* to Him. Even now, sinners are coming home. Christ (still a sinner magnet) still offers Himself to anybody and everybody. You and the dirtbag next to you are forgiven. Not because you made yourself forgivable; you are forgiven because there is a Forgiver who operates solely by grace.

Hey, what’s with the music? The older brother refuses to celebrate. The older brother refuses to come to the feast. In fact, it is the feast itself that infuriates him. The feast itself is the obstacle. Remember, Luke sets this parable up by telling us that the Pharisees were flamed out because Jesus received sinners... and ate with them and was happy to do so! Joy! In the parable there is an urgent necessity to celebrate. In this world the lost, the spiritually dead, all those who made their dwelling in the far country by sinning and sinning and sinning – when they return it is a matter of pure elation. Divine love for them never ceases, a Father’s love. That love wills to give everything He has. That love wills to give His Son. Grace is anchored in a terrible sacrifice. In love for this world, for all who dwell in it, God the Father gives His Son. Seeing our Lord crucified tells you how much the Father wants us – all of us, more and more of us, sinners of every language, tribe, and nation. Whenever they come to Him, He is overjoyed.

We must not be the older brother. We must not be the older brother. We must not be the older brother. His life in his father’s house is characterized by grudging service: he sees himself as a

slave, not a son. Oh sure, he's obedient to the father's rules, but reluctantly. There is no love in his heart; not for his father; certainly not for his brother. He does not see grace in his life and thus cannot reflect it to others. He has no joy at that which the father rejoices. The older brother does not share his father's values. How dark and poor and void – a heart without love, a heart that has no grace. That must not be us.

Each of you has come from a far country. The Father runs to give you the ring, the robe, the sandals, the kiss. Christ is the ring which the Father puts on your finger. The crucified and risen King is the robe with which the Father vests you, and He gives you the best seat, the richest food, the finest wine (the body of your Lord to eat, the grace of His blood to drink). Your heavenly Father runs to you each time you come into this holy house. He runs to you with His embrace. His Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, is His embrace.

Jesus went to the far country that no other could go to: Golgotha. There God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us. His blood is the reason for our community. His blood is the reason for the Christian church on earth. It is our joy to be with one another, forgiven sinners all. Here the community of the resurrection rejoices in forgiveness, life, and salvation. We know what the music is for.