

**SERMON**  
**“The Prodigal Son: Grace for the Lost”**  
**Luke 15:11-32**  
**Sunday, February 26, 2023**

I remember listening to one of my father’s sermons as a kid. He was preaching on the prodigal son (our text for this morning). I was sitting in what my dad called the “Amen Corner” with my best friend. The “Amen Corner” was where all the youth sat and half-listened to what was going on in church. What we did with the other half I will leave to your imagination.

About half-way through his sermon my father must have noticed I wasn’t paying as close attention to his sermon as he thought I should. As he got to the point in his sermon where the father sees his son returning and races out to meet him; my dad looked right at me, singled me out with a pointed finger, suddenly increased the volume of his voice that only preachers can do, and begin quoting what Jesus said of the prodigal’s return: “Throwing wide his arms, the father said...;” it was at that point my best friend leaned over to me and whispered loudly, “HE’S GOING TO TELL YOU YOU’RE GROUNDED!”

Like those of us who sat in the “Amen Corner” Jesus befriended sinners and tax collectors: the kinds of people who lived on the very margins of society. He even had table fellowship with them: eating and drinking with them...laughing and joking with them as if they were in the Amen Corner... extending God’s amazing grace to those who most of us would consider lost.

The scribes and pharisees, said of Jesus: *“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”* Like my best friend’s warning in the “Amen Corner;” they were ready to ground Jesus. I can envision them now with disapproving frowns or scorning scowls ready to pounce. What they had forgotten as the older sons; was that God’s grace had been abundantly lavished on them just as Jesus was lavishing on the sinners and tax collectors.

Like those scribes and pharisees of yesteryear there is still plenty of that kind of self-righteous legalism today. It can be found in many a pew as well as from the pulpit. In some ways we have all been like the pharisees and scribes. We tend to limit grace, putting up loveless barriers of critical distance toward others. While at other times we’re like the younger son feeling unworthy of the father’s welcoming embrace. Either way; Lent is a time for us to fess up to our failures and shortcomings. It’s time to get into the “Amen Corner” and start becoming the people God created us to be: People who rejoice, for in Christ that which was lost, has been found!

In our scripture passage for this morning the first sibling we meet is the younger son. Jesus describes him as “the prodigal.” Did you notice the first word this younger son speaks to his dad?

*“Father...”*

Theologian Michael Hoy says of the word: *“it is a sign of where he stands in the household. He is no slave. He is no hired hand who has no place to seek help or make demands. His life is not controlled by the whims of an uncaring employer. He is a child of the father. And as such, he trusts that his father will hear him, no matter what. Indeed, this younger child, in every one of his speaking engagements to the father, speaks to him with the same trust that his father is a loving parent. So, he will always begin with the same word, ‘Father’—not simply as a biological comment, but as a word with the expectation that he will be heard.”*

We’re no different, says Hoy; *“Every time we pray ‘Our Father, who art in heaven’ our faith dares to trust that this Father will listen to us; and whatever we ask of him; he will always hear us and hold us in his parental love.”*

But what is this that the younger son wants? He asks for his share of the property. He asks for his inheritance, something that will belong to him. Hoy says of the property; *“It is a grace that is set for the future. But this child asks for it now, already, in the present.”* The inheritance in biblical times, much like it is today, is a gift, a grace, that usually comes to one after the father has died. Occasionally, however, one might receive their inheritance in advance; but to do so is forfeit it for the future.

The older son refuses to forfeit his future; that’s why he never asks for anything of his father. He knows the proper channels to secure the gift of an inheritance.

Both want what the father has. The older son is willing to wait for it. But the younger son wants it now. He’s like the J. D. Wentworth commercial: “It’s my money and I want it now.”

So, what will these two sons do with the gift they're about to receive? The young now? And the elder later? Will they thank their father? Will they go on trusting the father? And how will they use the gift? Will they receive it as loving children? Or will their own selfish desire replace any deep awareness or incentive to thank the father who has gifted them so?

Hoy says, this is where their story now darkens. We see not only how the youngest prodigal becomes lost; we witness how the eldest son who has always remained by his father's side becomes lost. In spite of their lostness Jesus tells us the father keeps a watchful, waiting, and caring eye upon his sons; his love for them both never diminishes. He will not give up on either of them.

Well, we know what the younger son does with his gift; he changes his property into cash, and then goes to live in a distant country, where he squanders everything that he has received. Hoy says that it is because of the squandering that we come to know this younger son as the prodigal. What we also learn about him is that he squandered it all "in wild living"—that is, in a reckless lifestyle without any sense of moral decency or faithful responsibility. We are not told exactly what he did; the older brother, out of anger, accuses him of "*wasting it on prostitutes.*" Some biblical scholars believe the accusation may more accurately reflect the immorality that already exists within the desirous heart of the older brother than what lies within the heart of the prodigal himself.

In any event, the money is gone, and the younger son is left, as we say, "on his own." The first thing he does is to go find a job. His boss (a farmer); who cares little about him, gives him a most demeaning job: feeding slop to pigs." Not the kind of thing one wants to put on their resume. What's more, from his growling stomach, he can tell that even the pigs seem to be eating better than he is.

Hoy says, "*It is then that he hears the call of grace from a distant homeland: 'My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death!'*"

We, too, may cry out to God in our weakness. And even in the very depths of our own pigsty, we dare to trust that our Father in heaven will hear us. The great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther once said that even "*the sigh of those who put their trust in Christ, who meekly call out 'Abba! Father!'*" in the weakness of their faith, will be heard." He hears the single whispered sigh, says Luther, as though they were louder than our loudest shouts of praise!

I don't know about you, but every time I read this passage in Luke's Gospel I'm awed with the father's response to the prodigal's attempt at confession. Before the son can even form a word on his lips the father embraces him; and not only restores the son's privileges but gifts him as an heir to what remains of the father's estate. The father sparing no expense calls for the best robe, places the signet ring on his finger, kills the fatted calf, and throws a party — "*for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*"

Hoy says that "*the grace of God's love is a grace far beyond our limited and limiting imaginations. Our Lord Jesus the Christ came looking for us, and welcomed us into his presence. Christ considers us his friends. He sits and dines with us in all our lostness, healing and restoring us into the fullness of God's grace.*"

But the parable is only half over; not everyone comes to the celebration. The older son has been out in the field. When he returns, we are told he inquires of a servant about the party. This servant echoes the father's gracious heart as he answers the inquiry of the elder brother: "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound!"

But celebration is far from the mind and heart of this elder brother. When the father comes and even pleads with him to celebrate this moment of grace, the response of the elder brother is filled with anger and scorn: "'For years I have worked for you like a slave and have always obeyed you. But you have never even given me a little goat, so that I could give a dinner for my friends. This other son of yours wasted your money on prostitutes. And now that he has come home, you ordered the best calf to be killed for a feast.'"

Wow. Even the younger son, in all his prodigality, had the good graces at least to refer to his father more respectfully. But the heart of the elder son is a lot like the self-righteous legalists we noted earlier, who said of Jesus: "This man welcome sinners and eats with them." The elder son seeks to keep his distance from the father, even though the father goes out of his way to eliminate such distance for both of his children. Worse, the elder son thinks of himself as one "working like a slave." There is no joy for him. There is no grace in him.

Yet, even for this one, the father will not give up. And he even speaks now to this elder son of his with a most compassionate word, calling him, "Son." In the Greek it means "precious child of mine" How many of us, even in our most adamant ways, would not welcome to hear such kindness, "Child, you are always with me"?

So, this father, like our own Father in heaven, invites us to come and celebrate. This is amazing grace. God and the prodigal — the younger one — and the older one. Regardless of who we are we are all invited to the party. So, what will it be? Will you come? Or will you complain that it's not fair?

In his book *Craddock Stories, Preaching and New Testament* scholar Fred Craddock tells of a revival he once attended in a small rural church on a hot summer night. "I remember I was seated on a pew next to an open window hoping a breeze of fresh air would bring me relief. As I was listening to the preacher drone away a stranger came up to my opened window and whispered: 'Psst, psst.'

I said, 'What is it? I'm listening to the sermon.'

He said, 'Come with me.'

I said, 'Where are you going?'

He said, 'I know where there is a pearl of great price that's more valuable than all the other pearls in the world.'

I said, 'There's no such thing.'

He said, 'In fact, where I'm going, there is treasure buried in a field.'

I said, 'You're kidding!'

He said, 'Where I'm going, bums are invited to sit down at the king's table.'

I said, 'That's ridiculous.'

He said, 'In fact, they give great big parties for prodigals who come home.'

I said, 'That's stupid.'

Well, I listened to the rest of the sermon and after it was over, I told the preacher about how I was disturbed and that I hoped it didn't upset him during the sermon.

He said, "Who was it that came to the window?"

I said, "I don't know. But he was telling me all this fancy stuff."

He said, 'Well, was he getting anybody?'

And I said, 'Well, none of our crowd from the revival went, but I noticed he had about 12 with him.'

What will you do when you are invited to follow the Christ? Will you join him in his party? Will you rejoice for that which was lost is now found? Or will you, like the older brother, complain about the unfairness of it all?

Whether you identify with the younger brother or the older one God doesn't want either to continue in their lostness. And that's what so amazing about God's grace!