

Where are You in the Father's Love Story?

4th Sun. in Lent – 03/30/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 Pastor Keith Besel

[Literal translations from the Greek:]

v. 20, [Speaks of the father, when his younger son returns,] **“Yet being a far distance away, behold, his father saw him and his guts turned in compassion, and running he fell upon (his son's) neck and he kissed him.”**

v. 31 [The father says to his older son,] **“My child, you are continuously, always with me, and all that is mine continuously is yours.”**

Introduction

✘ You know that someone is a truly good magician when his/her tricks and illusions prompt you to ask, “How did he/she do that?” And if you can get one of them to actually give you the answer, they will tell you that much of what they do is to distract your attention – even if only for an instant, onto something else that they're doing. Then you won't see them hide that item that seems to disappear or be changed into something different, and you will be stunned.

→ Well, get ready for some sleight of hand this morning, as Jesus responds to the criticism He's been receiving from, of all people, the leaders in the Jewish church. You see, they were not happy with the way that Jesus was actually interacting with – even eating with those who were not “members” of the church. Their derogatory, and you and I know that it was hypocritical term for those people, was to blanketly call them “sinners”; as if they were not.

✘ At the beginning of the chapter these Pharisees and scribes “grumbled” about Jesus and publicly accused Him saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Lk. 15:2). So Jesus told them three parables to try and get them to understand the true depth of His and the Father's love for all people, including both those who are currently outside of His church and those who are inside His church, but are a bit too full of themselves.

→ First, He tells the parable of the one lost sheep that has strayed from the flock. Then it's the parable of the woman who goes to the extreme to find her one lost coin. And now Jesus tells His clincher, especially getting the over-confident, pew-sitters and church leaders to focus first upon what has traditionally been called the “prodigal son”.

I. The younger son

✘ He's the younger of the two sons. And to be fair, he is certainly worthy of our attention. His blatantly selfish and disrespectful demand to receive his “share of (the father's) property, saying literally, “give me the part of the estate falling to me” (v.12) is nothing more than a public statement that he wished that his father was dead. In fact the last part of verse 12 would literally be translated, “And he divided between them his life.”

→ Ultimately, the father had full authority over the estate, because he was still alive. It all belonged to the family, of which he was the head. No son had the right to make this kind of demand while his father was still alive, because dividing the inheritance like this put the entire family business at risk. It cut the father's working capital in half.

→ On top of that, the way that this younger son wasted away his father's hard earned capital on himself and in immoral ways was an entire cultural disgrace. I mean the people he spent it on in wild living ... they were Gentiles! Unbelieving, unwashed, unclean Gentiles! To top it off, based on the older son's later remarks, there is no doubt that news of this younger son's actions had spread throughout the village back home.

→ He humiliated the family, harming his father's reputation. What a jerk! Who of us wouldn't think, "He deserves everything that he gets!" Jesus knows our thoughts. He even describes the terrible consequences of this young man's foolishness. He's feeding pigs – I can't think of a more humiliating job for a Jew. "Ha-ha!" I'm sure the church leaders – and even some of us are probably thinking. "The joke's on you, buddy. Where'd all your friends go now that you've wasted all of your cash?" "That's right, you got what you deserved!"

✘ If Jesus had stopped the parable there, most of His hearers, including you and me, would be okay with it as a lesson teaching that justice will be served; that you get the just fruits for your actions.

→ But, as we all know, that is not the end of the story, is it? You and I, and the others, all have our attention firmly focused on this "disgraceful" young man, ready to write him off entirely. And then Jesus tells us that he woke up; that he came to his senses.

→ The light bulb went on inside that noggin, "If Dad would just take me back as a slave, my life would be a whole lot better than this!" So, with his tail between his legs, he heads back toward home, rehearsing his apology. "I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants'" (vv.18-19).

✘ At this point, if we and the Pharisees aren't reveling over what this guy's actions brought him, we are certainly pleased, at least, that he has to eat crow; that his immature and disrespectful actions have brought him down in society to no more now than a servant's job. "Ha, you thought you'd come home and show your dad what a big man you were; you thought you knew better than everyone else. But look, you're gonna end up as a nobody on daddy's payroll." The magician's got our attention, doesn't he? And we think we know what's going to happen.

✘ But just when you expect that dad is going to make an example of this kid; leaving him to grovel and beg for mercy, Jesus sets the hook on the main point of His parable and unveils the unexpected twist. Dad is the one who goes entirely against what is socially and culturally accepted. He hikes up his robe – a major faux pas in that day, and runs out like a little child himself to greet his son, as if he were an important guest!

→ Beyond that, the father, calls for the equivalent today of a prime rib dinner – killing the fattened calf; the most tender of meats, and arranges a welcome-home banquet complete with music and singing. Still more, he quiets all the critics who said this kid should no longer be a part of the family, by publicly saying, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet" (v.22).

✘ And now, everyone is in shock. How'd Jesus do that? Why would the Father say and do that? "It's just not fair," comes ours and everyone else's complaint. But, Jesus, the master story teller, just smiles and continues.

II. The Father's "prodigal" (extreme) love.

✘ Because now it's time to introduce the character that Jesus knows best fits with those Jewish leaders, including you and me today: the older son.

→ He's the one that most in our circles would say had just as much right to be angry at the young son, as his dad. So he refuses even to set foot inside, where the celebrating is going on.

✘ Now the father's extreme, or "prodigal" love shows itself again. You see, the term "prodigal", at its root simply means "lavish, abundant, or extreme". It can be used to express the extreme waste of resources as we saw with the younger son. But it also fits to describe the "lavish and extreme", even unexplainable love of this father toward both of his sons.

→ And so, it is with a prodigal love that the dad, breaks protocol again. He takes the initiative to leave his celebration and go out to find his older son, who is throwing a judgmental temper tantrum and pity-party.

- ✘ His attitude is just as selfish; just as disrespectful as his little brother's was, even though he believes he is the only righteous person in this entire story. Listen carefully to what he says to his dad in anger. In today's lingo it would be like saying, "Come on Dad. I've slaved for you all these years. I never disobeyed you; never gave you any grief. Yet you never threw me so much as a pizza party for me and my friends!" Pretty selfish, right?

→ But now the insults really kick in. "But when this son of yours came," – notice how he's refusing to say that this is his brother at the same time that he mocks his dad for calling that "thief" his "son"; the one "who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" (v. 30).

→ "There's no way that I'm going to be a part of this mockery! I'm not celebrating the return of this 'son of yours' as though he were some kind of hero." I can just hear the Pharisees and Scribes thinking – because it's not like we haven't thought about it too, "Finally! Someone with a clear head on his shoulders! A voice for true justice! Good old dad needs that wake-up call. He's gone far too easy on your little brother, and, thankfully, you've got the guts to deliver the goods." And Jesus, I'm sure, just smiles even more.

- ✘ He's got them/us firmly in His grasp where we think that we're there, speaking justice and righteousness right along with the older son. How's Dad going to answer that great argument?

→ Then, with the very first word out of the father's mouth, Jesus pulls away the veil and reveals His own Father's "prodigal"; that is, "extreme" love for every single soul on earth.

- ✘ The Greek word in verse 31 is actually not the word for "son". It is "Τέκνον" which is much more intimate and personal. It means "my child". "My child," the father said to the older son who had just tried to disavow his father; "My child, you are continuously, always with me, and all that is mine continuously is yours."

→ Here, the father is, in a very loving manner, rebuking his older son's hurtful presumptions. "Do you really believe that I've made your life that confining and miserable? You think I've treated you as just one of the hired hands; only given you slave-quality food or slave-quality accommodations?" "Do you really believe that you are no longer part of this family; that your blood-brother is no longer family; that you don't have the same mother?"

→ "My child," the father reassures him. "None of this could ever undo how much I love you." "All that is mine continuously is yours" (v.31). But, just as I can never stop loving you, neither could I ever stop loving your brother. He is "my child" as well. So we have to celebrate. "For this your brother was dead, but he lives and he was destroyed but is found" (v. 32). When you hear it that way, as it comes directly from the Greek, you see how Jesus is describing the transformation of the younger son as if he has been raised from the dead and restored to the family by his father's prodigal love.

III. Where are you in the Father's love story?

- ✘ So dear friends, where are you today in your Father's love story?

→ Are you like the younger boy? Have you squandered the Father's love; taken His gifts selfishly, only for yourself? Have you realized the true depth of your sin, but now struggle in the mud of the "No one could ever love me", syndrome?

→ Or do you connect more with the elder-son and his sins of resentment and judgment; begrudging the Father's forgiveness of those you don't think deserve it; unwilling to embrace a

Father who always loves; always desires both the younger and older sons in this world to be a part of His family of salvation?

✘ You see, His love; His mercy, exercised in the death and resurrection work of Jesus His Son, is for all of us!

➔ So, when we understand that this parable is describing each one of us in our spiritual lives, we see that we have all been brought back from death! This is no sleight-of-hand story any more.

➔ Jesus has put the truth directly in front of us. For we have all, in our self-centered and sinful ways – whether we connect more to the younger or the older son; we have all been as good as dead.

✘ But now our Father ... He has taken the initiative. He has come running to us in the saving work of Jesus, His Son, and in a love like no other, He has cleansed you and me in the blood of Jesus! In your baptism, He has poured out His love like a flood; drowning that old sinful-self inside of you, and He has declared to each of us personally, “My child...”. “O My child, you are continuously, always with Me, and all that is Mine continuously is yours.”

➔ So, return dear people to your Father in confidence; knowing that His love for you has never wavered and His arms are always open wide for you. Amen.