

**March 31, 2019**

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

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, We humbly welcome you into worship with us. Please guide our study of your Word, illuminating its meaning according to your will. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## **The Other Son**

As I have mentioned, I recently spent two weeks with my younger daughter Madison in San Diego while she had knee surgery. When I got home, I received a beautiful card from her with a handwritten note.

“You were already in the top tier of moms around the world,” she wrote, “but this visit propelled you to the top of the leaderboard.”

I told her I was attaching the card to my will so her brother and sister would understand why she was getting the bulk of my estate.

We have always joked about inheritance in our family. What might be considered in bad taste elsewhere was fair game for us. My dad constantly threatened to disinherit us for perceived infractions.

When he was 72, he suffered from mini-strokes that left him impaired. He began having “incidents” while driving, and for some reason, would always give the authorities my phone number.

So I got a call from EMS when he drove into a ditch.

I got a call from the city police when he left a gas station without paying.

I got to meet with a Mauldin police officer after he made a U-turn in the middle of an intersection.

The officer told me that my dad needed to stop driving. I said that my brother and sister and I knew we needed to take his keys but we dreaded it. “You’ve got to do it,” the officer warned.

So I talked to my brother and sister and said, “You guys have to back me up. You know he’s going to cut me out of his will.” And they said, “Oh yeah, we’re behind you.”

So I told my dad he had to stop driving. Of course, he called my sister. And she called me and said, “Oh, Deb, you’ve been disinherited. I’m so sorry.”

If you were just reading that, you might think, *What a horrible family*. You’d have to understand our tone and custom and history.

And so it is with today’s Scripture passage about inheritance in the ancient world. This parable is found only in Luke’s gospel, and it is one of our best known. But understanding it depends on a knowledge of tone and custom and history.

It also depends on a knowledge of whom Jesus was addressing.

You may have heard it called “the parable of the Prodigal Son.” But that’s really a misnomer. More accurately, it should be called “the parable of the Forgiving Father.”

Because you see, this father did not just forgive a prodigal son. He also forgave an older son, a dutiful son. A son who was very much like the Pharisees who were listening that day.

And we miss the point if we don’t deal with both of these young men.

Luke tells us right up front why Jesus is telling this story: His preaching was attracting tax collectors and sinners. And the Pharisees and the scribes didn't like that.

They were upset that Jesus was hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. In other words, they were upset that Jesus was hanging out with drug dealers and addicts and thieves and alcoholics and prostitutes. They were upset that Jesus was hanging out – in the neighborhood around Tiberias.

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 15. The first three verses tell us who's in the audience. **Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-24:**

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.  
2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

3 So he told them this parable: *(jump down to Verse 11)*

11 ... 'There was a man who had two sons. 12 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.

13 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. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

15 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. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

17 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! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' "

20 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. 21 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." Treat me as one of your hired servants'."

22 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. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

We're going to stop here for a minute.

This younger son was a piece of work. Asking for your inheritance before your father's death was an insult. It was saying to your father: "I wish you were dead."

After this unloving and hostile action, the son traveled further down the road toward dissolution: He left the country where his good Jewish kinsmen lived, and went to live among the Gentiles.

I don't want to belabor this part because I imagine you've heard this passage preached all your life. This young Jewish man hit rock bottom, not merely feeding the pigs that his religion considered unclean but longing to eat with them.

So he decided to return home and throw himself on his father's mercy. He practiced his speech, and set off.

Now the story turns the spotlight on the father. **"But while he was still far off, his father saw him."**

That sentence hints that perhaps the father had been watching all along for him -- day after day, week after week, month after month, for as long as the son's years of living dangerously lasted. The father never stopped watching for his boy's return.

But the parable tells us something else, too. The father was filled with compassion and ran toward his son. This doesn't sound odd to our ears. But it was shocking to Jesus' first-century audience. Remember: tone, custom, history.

Men of wealth and prestige did not run. Men of honor and dignity walked. They walked slowly.

Neither did men show their legs. So to run in the first century would have violated at least two things: The flapping robe would have revealed the man's legs, and running in and of itself was common, undignified, buffoonish.

And that is exactly what this father did.

The younger son tried to give his repentance speech, but the father waved it aside. He called for his servants to bring the young man symbols of welcome and respect.

The robe was a garment of honor.

The ring was a sign of authority.

The sandals meant he was a free man, for slaves went barefoot and free citizens wore shoes. The son who asked to become a hired hand was accepted, instead, as a son of the household, restored to his original position.

But then it got even better. His father called for a fatted calf to be killed for a big party.

**“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”**

For many readers, that's where the story ends. If we stopped reading at verse 24, this would be a perfectly logical parable about a prodigal son. This would be a story about sinners who repent and a loving God who stands ever ready to forgive. This would be a story about some of us at Triune.

But that's only half the story. The parable isn't over. Jesus then pivots to address the rest of us at Triune.

25 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound."

28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

31 Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 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." '

Don't forget who is listening to this story along with the tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and scribes are there, people who focus on right and wrong, people who focus on religious law.

I'm a Pharisee. So are Tandy and Cheri who teach Sunday school. And Jonathan who teaches Bible study. And our staff members who keep order.

So is everyone in here who prides him or herself on leading a moral, upright life. One of my seminary professors used to say, *You want to live next door to a Pharisee.*

We have one in our neighborhood and you better believe we run to him when something goes wrong.

But upon occasion, the Bible takes us Pharisees to task.

When the older son heard the music and learned the party was in honor of his shiftless, wastrel brother, he was furious. He refused to go into the party.

Tone, custom, history. Once again, the father exhibited extraordinary behavior. He left the party – which would have risked humiliation and shame in the eyes of his guests – to go outside and deal with his recalcitrant older son.

The older son's bitter complaint is telling: **“For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command.”**

Do you hear the Pharisee in his words? There is no joy in the relationship, only obedience, only a following of the law.

The older son challenged the father for refusing to deal harshly with the younger son. He was red-hot that his faithfulness was not appreciated while his brother's selfish and hurtful actions were rewarded.

*No, that's not quite right,* said his father. **“You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.”**

It's easy to see the grace that the father extended to the prodigal son. But he's extending it, too, to the dutiful older son.

It's easy to see that the prodigal son accepted his father's grace.

But we are left not knowing if the older son came in to the party, if the older son accepted the gift.

*Because we older sons often do not.*

In this story, Jesus was talking about tax collectors and sinners, who, like the prodigal son, were offered the gift of grace.

But in this story, Jesus was also talking about the Pharisees and scribes, who, like the older son, were offered the gift of grace, too.

We like to see the Pharisees and the self-righteous get their comeuppance in the Scriptures. We root for the underdog, for the prostitute who poured perfume on Jesus' feet, for the tax collector who prayed in the temple with his head bowed, for Zacchaeus hidden in the tree.

But the gospel is not the gospel if it is not available to the self-righteous Pharisee. Jesus came for tax collector and Pharisee alike. He came for sinner and for scribe.

The problem, as this parable points out, is that it may be easier for the tax collector and the sinner, for the prodigal son, to accept God's grace than it is for the Pharisee and the scribe and the older son.

Self-righteousness can be a plank in the eye that prevents us from helping our brother remove the speck from his eye.

It can be the obstacle that prevents us from accepting the glorious gift of God's forgiveness.

Because if you're always right, it's hard to see that you need forgiveness.

This neighborhood, this congregation, is the spitting image of the audience present when Jesus first preached this parable.

There were tax collectors and sinners and grumbling Pharisees and scribes. Jesus told them a story about a God who forgives them all.

Their challenge, our challenge, is to realize that forgiveness is available -- and forgiveness is necessary -- to every single one.

Amen.