

The Foolish Forgiveness

Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

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Lent 4 C

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Everyone ready for a quiz? Three years ago I stood here and told you what was wrong with the title of the parable we're going to study today. Everyone remember? No? Well, actually there's two problems with it. One, by and large people don't know what the title means and secondly, even when you know what it means, it misses the point of the parable entirely. So let's start with the title itself; the parable of the Prodigal Son. Prodigal Son has become a cultural idiom for someone long lost who returns, but that's not what prodigal means. The word itself means someone who spends recklessly without counting the cost. Like those in our society with maxed-out credit cards and the like.

But the point of the story isn't even about how the younger son foolishly spent his money. Instead, the real star of the parable is the father. Well, we'll get to that. Let's take a look at our account again: <read text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32>.

First of all, the first three verses of our reading give us the context in which Jesus was speaking. He was gathering together with tax collectors and other types of sinners to eat. Just like today, to sit and share a meal with someone meant that they were accepted, at least on some level. The Pharisees, moral leaders of the day, those who carefully studied God's Word and strove to keep all his commands were appalled at this. These people Jesus was accepting were the people who had abandoned God's Law and God's Word and had given themselves over to the darkest nature of human beings. They were the lowlifes, the dregs; people to be shunned, not accepted! When they ask how Jesus can justify this, he tells them three parables.

Now, our selection for today skips over the first two parables, go ahead and read through them at home if you like, they do set up the knockout punch of the third pretty well. Of course it's a story we all have heard many times, I'm sure. A younger, reckless son demands his share of the estate. You know, the stuff he would normally get after his father died? That's just a hair short of saying "Dad, I wish you were dead." The father had every right to simply disown him at that point, but instead he complies and sends the younger son on his way with a purse full of coins and a dream of wanton living. Though he shows that he has at least the smallest bit of conscience left, because he travels far away to carry out this reckless lifestyle, he doesn't want to run into family or friends who might make him feel guilty.

We all know how this story ends, the younger son wastes everything he has through chasing after his own pleasure and ends up with nothing. In time, he comes up with a plan to return home and ask to be made a hired hand in his father's house. He carefully rehearses his speech of repentance and returns home. Now, just for a moment consider how *you* would finish writing this story. If you were going for a believable drama that still pulled at some heartstrings, how would you make it play out? The father perhaps rises up from his seat and watches patiently as his son approaches. Gives him a blank expression that reveals nothing and waits for the son to speak. The son pours out his heart in apology, begs to be hired on as nothing more than a worker. We see a tear roll down the father's cheek as his expression finally breaks and he embraces his son. He is welcomed back as a son, and allowed to work as a son for his room and board and a lifelong bond is rekindled.

Makes for a nice Lifetime movie, but that's not what happens. What does happen seems foolish when you think about it. His father sees him from a distance. And he runs out as soon as he recognizes the boy and before the prepared speech can be poured out, the father interrupts him with an embrace, probably lifting the started son off his feet and calls for a celebration. In leaving, the son had cut his ties to the family, but the father calls for the best robe of the house (his own) and the ring of the family crest to be put on him. He is immediately part of the family again. No questions about where he's been, where the money is, if he learned his lesson, no. A grand feast is prepared to celebrate, with the fattened calf to be prepared as the main course, because the son who was lost to them has returned.

This outpouring of grace from the father is unexpected at best but we who understand the impact of it certainly appreciate it. We know what it means for us. We are the ones who were born lost. We chose to willingly separate ourselves from our Father to pursue our selfish interests. But once we come to realize what a mess we make of things on our own, we approach our Father and the response we get is totally unwarranted, but we couldn't be happier about it. No matter how long we've been gone, no matter what we've done in the meantime, the Heavenly Father wraps us up in his embrace as soon as we get near. Knowing that we need him is all he wants from us. The forgiveness is immediate and there. The confession, the repentance, that can come. But the forgiveness and acceptance is there immediately. It's always there. It's foolish on God's part to just give this gift away, a gift that cost the life of his own Son. It is God who is prodigal, it is God who gives without counting the cost, but we couldn't be happier that it's here.

But the parable isn't over. There is someone else to consider. Someone who is not pleased with the way the events turned out. Someone who does not feel like celebrating. The elder son comes in from his diligent work in his father's

fields. He sees the celebration and asks a servant what the hoopla is about. Wait...what? The younger "brother" had the gall to show his face here again and Dad threw him a *party*? That is something the older brother will have no part of. He stands outside the celebration huffing in protest.

The father, again does something shocking, particularly in this culture. His older son has now insulted him, disobeying the wishes of the patriarch; but rather than leaving the son out there or outright disowning this son, he instead leaves the party he is hosting to go out and plead with the older son to come in. "No!" says the older son. "I've never disobeyed you. I have done everything you've asked my entire life. I was faithful and hardworking. And you've never rewarded me for this in any way. Now this estranged brother of mine returns, the one who wanted you dead and spent all your money on pleasures and prostitutes, you throw him a celebration with the best our family has to offer!"

Pause here for a moment as it dawns. The father had lost both his sons. And so far, only one had returned. This son of his at home, the older son, was here, but was just as lost as his brother had been. He had done everything right in his father's eyes, but now it comes out *why* he had done these things. Not because he loved his father and wanted to do his father's will out of that love. He probably did love Dad, but that wasn't why he did his work. He wanted to do the right things so that he could have leverage over his father, so that he could be in control of his father and more importantly, over his father's things. His motivation for doing his work was what he would *get* out of his actions. This is not so far removed from the attitude of the younger son.

The difference now is that the younger son has seen the error and returned. The elder son is still standing in the cold outside. The father again tries to reason with his son. "Everything I have is yours and you are always with me, but your brother has come back to us from the dead. We had to celebrate." And then after this touching plea from the father to his son, the parable ends.

Once again...not exactly how we would write this story, is it? Where's the return of the older brother? You can't just end the story there! But that was exactly the point, because what happened next had not been determined. Jesus spoke this parable to elder brothers, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They did everything that was right according to God's law and they were absolutely disgusted that Jesus would associate with those who squandered the Father's wealth. Jesus was pleading with them to see the joy of a lost brother returning, to be thankful that God forgives without cost, no matter how foolish it seems. And to examine their own hearts and see if they were working for God out of love or to earn something from the Lord. He wanted them to share in his inheritance, he wanted them to come in to the celebration, the parable ends and becomes reality...would they?

Having been so grateful that the Father welcomes us as the younger brother, now that we are again part of the family and again doing our part for the family, we must be on our guard that we do not become the older brother. Ask yourself, have I kept the spirit of the older brother alive in me? Do I look down on those who give in to sins that I never would? Do I think that my stronger faith and my (outwardly) moral life makes me more pleasing to God than someone else? Even worse, do I think that God owes me more than others because of how hard I struggle to follow him with my life? Or on the reverse, do we think that God owes others a bit more punishment than some because of how little they care for trying to follow him? To come to the point of it, do we find ourselves wishing that God were just more *fair* in how he treated us all? To let others just "get away with it" is foolish!

If these are thoughts we find ourselves flirting with, then we need to reconsider what is fair, and what the cost of forgiveness really is. You were once the younger son. Would you want the Father to truly treat you fairly? That's a very slippery slope, indeed. Instead, rejoice in the Father's "foolish" forgiveness for others just as much as you rejoice in it for yourself. It is the Father who has spent on you without caring about the cost. It was Jesus who spent recklessly on you. The debt of your own sin, even in your "moral" life for God, is piled higher than any of us can imagine. God, in his grace has come to you and erased your debt. You are forgiven. Freely. It has to be free or it is not forgiveness. If there was something you or anyone else had to do to "make up for it", it wouldn't be forgiveness. But that forgiveness did not come without a cost. Jesus spent his entire self for you on the cross so you could be forgiven. He paid the cost of your forgiveness.

Now, those that would treat their faith lightly, who flirt with sin their whole lives or even the full-on younger brothers who have given themselves over to the devil, these are dangerous things. And we who are in our Father's house should be proper elder brothers and sisters. Ones who go looking for our lost siblings. Ones who welcome back the lost when they return and embrace them as the Father would. Ones who forgive without considering the cost to ourselves. Never thinking that we are doing this work so our Father can owe us something, but doing it out of love for him, in response to the love his has already shown each of us. We can be the brothers and sisters to each other that we were meant to be, because our Father has made this of us by his grace. Amen.