

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

March 6, 2016

Throughout the history of the New Testament church, many of the Sundays were given names. Most often the name came from the psalm reading selected for the day and, of course, most old things usually come in another language ... many Sundays have Latin names. The Latin name for the fourth Sunday in Lent is *Laetare*, which means *rejoice*. It is the theme of the Gospel for today, and for our worship.

In the midst of this season of repentance, joy rings out as Luke 15 calls us to rejoice with the angels in heaven and to celebrate the father's love for sinners. We've been spending a lot of time lately talking about sin. Today the target is a little bit different. In response to our great need, God has shown us His boundless love and grace and mercy. Jesus has come to seek and to save the lost. This gives us cause to celebrate. It is most appropriate to rejoice today. The 40 days of Lent don't include Sundays because even in the midst of this season we get in this Gospel text a preview and a foretaste of Easter. Did you notice the reason the father called for a great celebration? The son who was lost, was now found, the son who was dead, is now alive. This text gives us a foretaste of the joy of the resurrection and the praise and celebration of the heavenly banquet.

Luke 15 is a series of three parables addressed to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They disagreed with what Jesus was doing as He met with and ate in the company of tax collectors and sinners. It is important to remember that context because it helps us to see that the parable is not just about the return of a wayward son. It is about two wayward sons. Two sons who didn't know what grace meant. Two sons who didn't understand the foolish message of the cross. That in Christ, God was reconciling the world unto Himself and not counting men's sins against them. It is about how people can wander far away from God and His grace, and still be in the church. You see, the elder brother was physically home, but he too had wandered from the father. For him grace was foolishness. In his eyes the father's grace toward the prodigal was foolishness. He was simply setting himself up to be taken advantage of ... again. The elder brother had messed up priorities in his life. He loved position and power. He loved property and wealth. He believed that he had to work like a slave for his father and so he was jealous when recognition and status was freely conferred on his brother. He said to his father, "you never gave me anything". Grace was not in his vocabulary.

What we need to see is that lost isn't always geography. The older brother's heart is also far from home and the parable is really about two lost sons. The younger son typifies the open sinner who runs from God and pursues this world's things ... wild living. How do you picture that? The Greek uses an interesting word ... it uses the Greek word for "saved" with a negative in front of it, literally "unsaved living" ... all those things that our sinful nature longs to pursue. The older son is the self-righteous one who goes through the motions of obedience, but who is inwardly devoid of love for his father. The younger son, now off in the far country runs out of money. Then he runs out of friends. Then he runs out of options. He's feeding the pigs ... and no one gave him anything.

I want you to remember those words ... no one gave him anything. He decides to go back to his father. He has no claim on him anymore but he has a memory. He used to think it was foolish, but his father has always had a soft heart and that's the only hope he has. He is still somewhat confused. He's thinking in earthly terms. How can I work my way back into my father's favour? He does not quite understand the meaning of grace, nor the giving love of his father. The younger son had said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired men." His plan is really not much different from the elder son's self-made righteousness. The way to the father is earned. If you don't mess up you can stay. If you do mess up, you will have to make it up and earn your way back into the family. Like his older brother, he was still living under the thought that "no one gave him anything."

Did you pick up the older son's real complaint against his father? He is shocked by his father's actions toward his brother. He thinks he deserves the feast. He says, "you never gave me ..." He is lost in his own self-righteousness and self-made sainthood. The message of the cross, the message of sacrificial grace, is foolishness. When he looks at his father the older brother sees not a father who loves and gives, but a master who commands and rewards. Neither son really knows the heart of the father. And so even while living at home, the older son ends up just as lost as his prodigal brother. The point of this parable is to reveal the heart of the father.

Let me ask you this question, “When did the father forgive his prodigal son?” Think about it before you answer. Was it when the son spoke the words, “father, I have sinned . . .?” Was it when the father saw him still far off? Or was it just after the son left home? The father brushes aside all pretense of dignity and runs out to greet him. He throws his arms around his long lost son, still covered in the dirt and stench of the pig-pen. The son has already been forgiven before he says the words. The prodigal’s last shred of self-worth melts away in the face of overwhelming love. Now he repents, he truly repents. Before grace was revealed, he could only hope that he might make amends but now grace comes in the full measure of the father’s undeserved love. Now he begins to understand the foolishness of grace. Now he gives up any hope of making amends and simply casts himself on his father’s mercy, hoping beyond hope that his father’s love will cover all his debts.

You see, true repentance does not come from the fear of God alone. It does not come from the despair of recognizing the mess we are in. It is moved by faith’s confidence that this is a Father who will forgive. The father has gone out to meet his wayward son in a matchless picture of the incarnation. The father runs to his son, even as Jesus takes on human flesh and runs to us. Just as he came down in the flesh to seek and to save the lost he did not wait for us to find our way back to him. Now with a kiss of peace the father grants and bestows his forgiveness and the son embraces it with repentant faith. He calls for clothing and jewelry fit for the son of a king. He covers over the tattered clothes, the dirty body, the unkempt appearance. The one who was dead is alive again. He has been brought home.

There is true reconciliation. The years of rebellion and wasteful living, the heartless selfishness is erased in a moment but the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. That’s why the Pharisees and the teachers of the law grumble against Jesus. He did not fit their expectations of what God was like. To the average person in Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were the height of religious virtue. They were in every way the opposite of the tax collectors and sinners. They were the elder brother. The sinners were the ones who had squandered their inheritance from the Lord. They had sold themselves into sin. They wallowed in the depths of depravity.

The Pharisees were the insiders with all the privileges of membership. They were anything but lost . . . they thought they were the 99 who didn’t wander. They were the elder son who stayed home with the father. Grace was a foreign concept to them. Repentance is something those people on the outside have to do, so thinks the elder son. At the end of the first parable, Jesus says, “there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.” They despised those who were sinners and who had no place in God’s kingdom. It brought them no joy to see Jesus hanging out with such people. But Jesus turns the tables on them. They are unable to rejoice over the salvation of the lost because they themselves have not repented. They may think themselves insiders, but they are in fact strangely excluded. They too are living under the impression that no one gave them anything. They have missed grace. They have missed the gift. They have missed the Messiah. The Messiah has come, the kingdom has come, lost children of God are being brought to God’s house, but they cannot rejoice. Like the elder son in the parable, they are bitter and jealous. They see no need for themselves to repent.

The danger we face is that we begin to think that we have earned our place with the father. That we have done our part and God has given us our due. That we don’t need grace either. That is what this parable is partly about. It is about repentance and reconciliation. This parable is about more than the return of the wayward sinner. It is about God’s gift for all. It is about grace. It also calls for the self-righteous to repent. They too are estranged from the father and need to come to terms with what is really important. The parable is really about two lost sons. One of them returns to the love and grace of the father. What the other one did is left open. What will he do? Will he discover the grace of the father for himself? Will he come in to the banquet and rejoice?

You see, you have to provide your own end to the story. Will you do what is necessary? Will you, in the power of the gospel, repent and believe the good news? There is a connection between repentance, faith, and life. Repentance texts also speak of faith and invariably also include bringing forth the fruits of repentance. Our tendency is to separate repentance, faith, and Christian life. They are separate words, separate meanings, but you can’t take them apart without damaging them. And you can’t understand them without seeing the grace of God. It’s not as if the law works repentance and the gospel works faith. It is the gospel that does both.

The despair that the prodigal felt in the pig pen did not bring forth faith. It brought remorse but not real repentance. You see, without faith there is no real repentance. Without repentance there is no real faith. And if there is no fruit of a Christian life, then neither the repentance nor the faith will do you any good. They all go together.

When John the Baptist saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” Jesus says the same thing in John 15, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Repentance, faith and fruit all go together. They all have their start in the same place. They are all energized by the same power source, the grace of God revealed in the good news of the Gospel.

Remember the question: “when did the father forgive his prodigal son?” Was it when he spoke the words, “father, I have sinned against heaven ...”? Was it when the father saw him still far off? Or was it just after he left home? The father had a heart of grace for his son from the very beginning. Not in view of his repentance, not because he came crawling back, but because the father loved him ... he always loved him.

This is a picture grace and of holy baptism held up before our eyes. The lost are found. The rebellious and disobedient are shown mercy. The father has washed us clean of our sins. Through this baptism we truly died to our old lives and were made alive again. And our father has clothed us with the perfect beauty of Jesus’ righteousness. But all this was strange and unknown to the older brother. To him the gospel is foolishness. He could not forgive his brother. He could not understand the actions of his father. The concept of grace was foreign to his heart and life. The brother now could not forgive his father for forgiving his brother. He expected his father to be like him. When he discovered that he was not, he rejected his father.

How does the parable end? The ending that the Pharisees would write has the elder brother rise up in anger and kill his father for being gracious. You see, that’s what they did. They rejected Jesus and his message of forgiveness and turned him over to be crucified. Which brother are you? How does your story end? Some who are lifelong in the church stay near God for the wrong reasons and don’t understand grace. They are not near at all. Others come back to him for the wrong reasons. They believe that they can somehow work their way back but the father would give grace to both, embracing, kissing, gracing us with the call to come back to him. Both sons had started out rejecting their father’s love. So Jesus directs the parable to both the tax collectors and sinners, and to the Pharisees and Scribes.

If we forsake the father’s love, the result will be the same. Spiritual impoverishment, despair ... death, spiritual estrangement, bitterness ... death. Whichever son we happen to be, the father calls us back to himself. What are we, who are his returning children, now called to do? We are called to celebrate the father’s love. We are called to serve joyfully with grateful hearts. We are called to rejoice in the blessings he gives others, as the angels do in heaven. We are called to seek the salvation of those who are lost. We are called to bear fruit.

What more can we say? We too are invited to the supper ... as the guests of God. Our father in heaven has sacrificed the lamb for our forgiveness and has set before us a great feast. We are brought to Christ’s supper. He is the Lamb slain who cleanses us from all sin. Here is the foretaste of the feast to come. And we continue to live under repentance and faith. The father’s graciousness continues to call us through repentance into His feast. Where does all of this start? It starts with the overwhelming, persistent love and grace of God in Christ. It ends in eternity as we gather with the saints and angels to praise the God of all grace forever.