

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ... “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ” (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

God Loves his Sons

Someone once wrote, “If you want to see a man cry, ask him about his father.” His point was making that fathers and sons sometimes have complicated relationships. Sons care deeply about what their dads think about them and their lives and dads actually care very much what their sons think. But they can’t always talk about it. History gets in the way. If there is more than one son in a family, it can make the situation many times more complex. The way dad relates to the oldest might very different from the way he relates to the youngest or the middle son. That can be confusing for everybody. It doesn’t have to be that way. But it is often enough. Jesus used that common experience to teach us an important lesson about our relationship with our Father in heaven: **God loves his sons.**

I

We’re saying “sons” because Jesus told a parable about a father with two sons. He lived in a very male oriented society and his parable wouldn’t have made any sense if he had talked about a father and his daughters. But the point Jesus was making is not just for men. Sometimes, the New Testament uses “sons” because only sons could inherit. That point is, we are all God’s sons – even the women among us. We are all God’s heirs. So today God is speaking to all of us. **God loves his sons** (his children). **God loves the prodigal son.**

That can be any of us, too – male or female, young or old, single or married. Jesus told this parable because he was being criticized by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law for receiving tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law tried hard to live a morally upright life. And it offended

them that this famous rabbi sometimes seemed more interested in people who didn't even try to live a Christian life than he was in people like them who they thought did better.

Of course, you know the parable. A man had two sons. One day, the younger son asked his father to give him his share of the inheritance right way. He wasn't willing to wait for dad to die. That could've taken years and the younger son wanted to have the money while he was still young enough to enjoy it. If that wasn't surprising enough, the father did it! Of course, it ended badly. The son went to a distant country – someplace where he didn't have to see dad's disapproving looks. And he spent all his money in wild living. It was one continuous party. That's what "prodigal" actually means – wastefully extravagant. He drank and partied and spent his money on prostitutes – until that money ran out. Just when that happened, life took a bad turn. A famine hit that country. That meant he was in real trouble. The only work he could find was taking care of pigs. Jesus chose that on purpose – for Jews, pigs were unclean. This young man's humiliation could not have been more complete. Even pigs were eating better than he was.

That's when the light went on. He realized that he had done this to himself. His own sinful behavior had consequences. Then he recognized that life didn't have to be like this. Even the hired men who worked for his father had enough to eat. If we don't make sinful choices, the consequences of those sins don't come down on us. But that isn't the part that really impresses me. It's what he decided to do. He decided to go back to his father and plead for mercy. That is repentance. We are sinners and we know it. But we also know that we have a Father who loves us and who is merciful to us. Notice what that son planned to say to his father. He didn't plan any excuses. He didn't even plan to be asked to be received as a son and again and to move back into his old room. He planned to say, **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."** "It's my fault. I sinned against God who commanded better of me and against you who loved me and gave me all these opportunities. I don't deserve to be called your son. But please, father, have mercy and hire me to work for you." He showed real, humble sorrow over sin. And yet, he had faith that hoped for mercy from a loving father.

Jesus told this parable to teach us that our Father in heaven loves us and is waiting to have mercy on us. He longs for our repentance. You see that in the story. The son heads home. Luke says, **"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him."** The Greek literally says "he was moved in his guts for him." How is it that dad saw him from so far away? It's possible he just happened to be out in front doing something and he looked up and saw him. But I think Jesus wants us to picture this father looking down the road every day, hoping to see his son. Then when he did, he recognized instantly that all his fears had come true. The son would've been dressed in rags and barefoot. He would've been filthy from tending pigs and walking for days or weeks to get home. But his father still knew him. And he was filled with compassion. He ran to his son. He didn't walk. He didn't stand there and wait for him to reach the driveway. He ran to his son and embraced him. His son could barely get his confession out of his mouth before dad was calling for servants to bring clothes and shoes, to put a ring on his finger and to kill the fattened calf. The father knew his son had sinned and wasted the father's life's work and what did he do? He celebrated. He said, **"For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."**

My friends, God loves us that much. I hope he never has to receive us back from such a tremendous fall into sin. But even if we walk away from him and waste all his blessings, even if we live the kind of openly sinful life that this son did, even if we commit sins that would horrify the church we grew up in and bring shame on our Christian parents, God wants us back. And when repentance comes, he celebrates. He throws a party in heaven. The angels dance and sing because a child of God was spiritually dead and now lives again by faith. He or she was lost to sin and death and hell, but now is found by God and rescued and part of his family again. That's why Jesus came to this world. He died and rose to pay for your sins and mine. And God wants nothing more than for us to know that and trust that. He wants us to come to him expecting his mercy and forgiveness. And he wants to sweep all our past away and have a party in heaven over us.

II

If Jesus' parable ended there, the amazing love of God celebrating sinners just because they repent would be plenty for us to chew on today. But Jesus told this parable because he was being criticized for this very attitude. So he added a second part to his parable, a part that maybe speaks more to church going people like us than the first part does. While it may feel a little bit like a rebuke to us, this part, too, is all about God's love. **God loves his sons. He loves the faithful son.**

The older son had stayed home and worked the farm. Dad was in charge, even though everything that was left was going to be this son's one day. Like the dutiful son he was, when the younger one arrived, the older one was out in the fields working. He didn't even know that the party had started. When he got up to the house, he heard music and dancing and he had to ask one of the servants what was going on. When he heard the answer, he was furious and refused to even go in. Does that surprise anybody here? How would you or I feel in that situation? His brother takes a third of the estate, which was younger son's portion, and blows it on prostitutes and wild living. When he comes home, dad celebrates!

Jesus clearly was using this son to picture the Pharisees. What was wrong with his attitude? It lacked the compassion that his father had for his brother. It was selfish and self-righteous and downright ugly. But the father loved both his sons. He went out and pleaded with his older son. In that world, dad was in charge. He could have commanded his son, but he didn't. He tried to persuade him. He worked to get him to see why love and mercy were the right response. Just as he didn't give up on his younger son when sin led him astray, the father did not give up on the older son, when pride led him astray.

That older brother said to his father, **"All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends."** What about me? That was pure sinful pride. But the father didn't chew him out. He dealt with him gently. He said, **"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."** He reminded him of his love. He affirmed his promises to him and the coming inheritance. But still he called him to change his attitude.

I said before that this part of the parable might speak more to us church going people than the first part does. How? Well, I actually hope that I'm wrong. But the Pharisees were the people who tried to live the way God commanded. They were very judgmental of people who had sinned. Jesus never excuses sin. But he does call us to deal with sin compassionately. He calls us to lead sinners to repentance. He calls us to rejoice when sinners come back to God. Do we do that? Well, we certainly love to see our church filled. We loved to see visitors and new families. But is that the same thing? What about when those people aren't the right kind of people? Does that ever enter into our thinking? Do we ever look down our long, church going noses at those people out there, and judge them? Do we pat ourselves on the back when we think about all the people in our confirmation class that don't come to church anymore, but we do? Do we congratulate ourselves on how much we give when we hear about financial problems and think that if those other people just did their part, we'd be OK?

What would that say about our hearts? Is there a little Pharisee living in us that thinks we're better than everyone else? Yes, there is, even if he doesn't show himself in this particular way. But God does not abandon us. The older son was still a son. God still loves us. We are always with him and all that he has is ours. We will live with him as his dear children forever. But that doesn't mean we can have a prideful attitude. It doesn't mean we can forget love and mercy. The father said very simply, **"But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."** If the brother could not understand that, he knew nothing of his father's heart. That is true for us, too. God calls us to reflect his heart when we deal with sinners. He calls us to love those who go astray. He calls us to celebrate repentance. To rejoice when the straying come back. To be glad when someone comes into our church who seems rough around the edges and who doesn't know how to act in church and who doesn't seem like the kind of person we want hanging around with our kids.

How can we have that attitude? By knowing that our pride and sin are forgiven. Jesus came and he died for the pride and the self-righteousness of church-going Lutherans. That includes all the times we judged others and patted ourselves on the back. That includes all the times we demanded attention for ourselves and consideration for all the years we've spent here and all we've done for this church. Jesus died and he paid for all that sin. He washed it all away. We are forgiven.

Like the younger son, we can go to our father and find mercy. Because we need it just as much as he did. That is the key to understanding God's love in this parable. We are sinners. We maybe do a better job of hiding that fact that some people do. But we still need God's love and mercy. In Christ, God gave it to us. Jesus died and rose because God loves us. Jesus came to us in baptism, he still comes to us in his word and in communion and in the forgiveness pronounced on us, because he loves us. His mercy will never fail. That mercy powers the mercy we show each other. Show that mercy. Amen.