

Sermon for March 10, 2013 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Blessings to you and peace from God the Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ  
and the Holy Spirit. Amen

As **surprising** as it may seem, preaching on a text that is one of Jesus' better **recognized** parables is a **bigger** challenge than preaching on one which is **not quite** so familiar. Our gospel lesson for this week, **second only** to the story of the Good Samaritan, is one of Jesus' most **widely known** teachings. The parable of the Prodigal or Wasteful Son.

In 2004 I had the opportunity to travel to St. Petersburg, Russia. While there I toured the Hermitage Museum. On the **first floor** of the Imperial Museum building is the Rembrandt Room. In it is housed **23 works** of this Dutch master. One of the paintings there is "The Return of the Prodigal Son." which is one of the **last** works of art Rembrandt did before he died. It took him **4** years to paint. As I stood before this **life size** canvas the parable came to life more **vividly** than ever before. I saw the father dressed in his **fine robe** with his hands **lovingly** placed on the back of his young returning son. Rembrandt depicted the father's hands as **both** mothering and fathering. The left hand appears **larger, stronger**, and more

**masculine**. It is set on the son's **left shoulder** while the father's right hand is **softer**, more **receptive** in gesture, and more **feminine** in its look. I saw before me the **wayward** young son who had come home with **tattered** clothes, **worn out** sandals, **shaved head** and **no beard** bowing at his father's feet with his head down. As I looked at the painting, located at the **right side** of the father, standing **stiff and erect**, is the elder brother who has his **hands crossed** in judgment as he looks on at what is happening. Although; the **most compelling** part of this painting was way the artist painted the **love and compassion** on the father's face as he looked toward a son who was **lost** but now had been **found**.

If you noticed the announcements for this morning I had Toni **intersperse** some **images** from that painting that I found because I thought that if we could get a feel for the **intense emotion** portrayed in it it could bring an **added dimension** to our lesson and sermon for today.

As I have talked about before—the **context** in which we find our gospel lessons make such an **impact** on what Jesus was trying to convey to his audience. At **this** time, Jesus was talking a crowd **including** the Pharisees and the scribes who represented the **law and the structure** of the Jewish religion. These Pharisees and scribes were **grumbling** about the fact that **tax collectors and**

**sinner**s came to Jesus to listen to him. And **not only that**, he **welcomes** them and **eats** with them as well!! But as you may **also** remember, Jesus came to **turn things around**, to **turn around the ways** of doing and seeing things that had been the tradition for **so** long. The story of the prodigal son is a **prime example** of that fact.

There is **so** much going on in this parable. This is enough for **3 sermons** as we could take a **much closer** look at **each** of the **three** main characters in this story. I ask you to possibly reflect on your own lives as you listen to this sermon today because you **just might hear** a bit about **yourself** or something **you** may have gone through at **one point** or **another** in your own journey in this world.

First, we have the **young son** who asks for his share of the inheritance from his father so he can leave the family home to go off to some **distant** country to **throw away** what he had on fast and loose living. This son wanted a **drastic** cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that had been **handed** down to him in his family from **generation to generation** as a sacred way of life. While he was away he **wasted** his possessions, he **fell** on hard times, he **hired** himself out to a citizen of the country to **feed** the pigs, and when he could see **no** other way to survive he went back home. I do believe at **one time** or another **each**

**of us** in our lives either **has or will** “leave home” going off desperately hoping to find **somewhere else** where we can “find ourselves” and a place we are **searching for** which we could **no longer** find at home.

Secondly, we have the **dutiful elder son** who stays at home, he **does** what he is told, he **lives** his life according to the **laws** of the land and his father, he **obeys** the rules, he wants to **live up to** his father’s **expectations** of him, he sees himself as a **slave**, and **ultimately** he becomes angry at the way his father is treating this “son of his” when the younger son returns home. He **cannot** even come to call the young man his brother. This elder brother had **stayed home, did not wander off** like his brother did; yet, he had **not lived** a free life in his father’s house. Now his **anger and refusal** to join the coming home celebration showed his own **lostness** in this story. It is characterized by **judgment and condemnation, anger and resentment** toward his father and his younger brother, compounded by **bitterness and jealousy** which is so **hurtful and damaging** to the human heart. Have you ever been **this person** in your life?

Finally, we have the father. This is the one on which I would like to focus the **rest** of the sermon. He is the **most important character** in the parable. He forms the **standard** by which **all other** behaviors here are to be compared. At the

**heart** of this parable he displays an **infinite compassion**, an **unconditional love**, an **everlasting forgiveness** coming from a **loving father** who loves both of his children equally **despite** their differences. This compassionate father is God; this is **who** God is **for us**. God's vision is that of an **all-giving & forgiving** father who does **not** measure out his love to his children according to **how well** they behave.

For you see, the **truth** of the matter is, in this parable that Jesus was telling his audience that day, the father had **not only lost** one son but he had lost **both of them**. The prodigal, wasteful child is **welcomed home** in the company of a **compassionate father** who runs out to greet him, a father who puts his **arms around him** and **kisses** the child, a father who **restores the child** to a position of **fullness** in the family by putting the **best robe** on him, by putting a **ring** on his finger, & by putting **sandals** on his feet. The **son** has been **restored** to wholeness. It is a time for **celebration** and **rejoicing** because the one which was dead has **come to life**, the one who was **lost** has **now been found**. **Rejoice, celebrate.**

The father came out and **pleaded** with the elder child to come in to eat and celebrate. He says to **us**, “Son/daughter you are **always** with me, and **all that is mine** is yours.” **God's invitation** for us is to **come in**—all of us, sinners, tax collectors, Pharisees, scribes, all of you. **Do not refuse to come in** and be a part of

this!!! We are **all** welcome. God has **enough love and compassion** for all. T

Through the **restored** relationships with his children it is the **Father who is being honored**. He is the one who loves us **all equally** in spite of our broken relationships with Him. We **too** have been accepted whether we have **physically journeyed** to a distant country or just **spiritually journeyed** away from God in our own hearts. **That** is what all the celebration is about. It is about our **restored** relationships with God. For you see, as I said earlier, Jesus came to **turn things** around, turn around the **traditional ways** of doing and seeing things. This parable is about **God accepting us all just as we are**—no matter **who we are**: everyone is accepted. The **love and compassion** of the God the Father is our focal point as we make our way to **Holy Week** and the **death, crucifixion, and resurrection** of our Lord Jesus Christ—**God's** one and **only** Son.

You may have noticed that this parable does **not have an ending**. Jesus does **not tell us** how the family goes on, he **does not say** how it all plays out. That is the **beauty** of this parable—it is an **ongoing story**, it is an **ongoing relationship** that each of us has with God. It is an **ongoing welcoming home and celebration** that never ends. Just as God's the Father's **love and compassion for us** all never ends. All thanks be to God. AMEN.