

Sermon for March 22nd, 2015 the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Luke 15:11-32

BLESSINGS TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER, OUR LORD
AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

This is the **last** Sunday of Lent. **Next** week we celebrate Palm Sunday and then we move on to Holy Week and Easter. **Today** in our reading from the gospel of St. Luke we heard the familiar *Parable of the Return of the Prodigal Son*. Much like the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* which we heard last Sunday—this is **also** one of Jesus' better known parables and this one **also** only appears in Luke's gospel.

When Jesus **originally** told this story to the tax collectors and sinners who were coming near to **listen** to him, it was told in response to the **grumbling** of the Pharisees and the scribes who were there saying, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" I guess they thought **they** didn't sin.

In 2008 I had the opportunity to go to Russia and visit the Hermitage Museum. In this **massive** museum there are rooms and rooms filled with artwork, statues, furniture, and tapestries of all sizes and shapes. You name it and it is there. **Many** of the rooms are filled with the works of just **one** artist. During our tour we went into the Rembrandt room. I looked before me and there was this **very impressive** painting, it was more than 8 feet high and 6 feet wide. It was

Rembrandt's painting, "*The Return of the Prodigal Son*."—I had Toni include a picture of it in our slide show for this morning.

As I stood before this **incredible** painting it was fascinating to see how the artist used light and shadow to convey the mood of the event. How the **destitute** returning son was on bended knee before his loving father. How the son's **head** was shaved bald, how his **clothes** were tattered and filthy, how he had **one sandal on** and the other sandal was so worn that it would not even stay on his foot. I noticed how the **father**, who was dressed in fine clothes and a beautiful red cloak, leaned over to embrace his son's back, how the **father's hands**, mercy which had become flesh, were lovingly placed on his son. The artist had chosen to paint the father's aged, weathered hands differently. One hand had long and slender fingers like a woman's and the other hand was thicker and more muscular like a man's. I noticed the human expression of divine compassion on the father's face for a lost son who had returned home.

The **images** in the dark background were difficult to see, which sharply added to the contrast of the bright light which seemed to appear out of nowhere on the forehead and hands of the father and on the forehead of the older, less than approving, brother. In the image of the older **brother** I noticed that his hands were folded together tightly around his waist and his eyes were cast downward toward his brother. As we read about in the parable, and see in the painting as well, the

older son appears to be deeply resentful towards his father's welcome home of this wayward brother.

The **reason** why I am telling you about this is because for each of us in some time in our lives we have the opportunity to be **any one** of the people in this parable or the painting. We could be the younger rebellious son/daughter. The one who **disrespects** their family, all they have **grown up with**, and wants to **go out into the world** to make their own way with **no regard** for the loved ones at home. The one who **no longer wants** the restrictions that home brings, the one who wants to **get out and live their life**—to see what the world has to offer them beyond the confines of home. I was a child of the '60's and there were plenty of rebellious youth who were pushing up against the status quo at that time. **That** was for sure.

Or we could be the **dutiful** older brother/sister. The one who **stays behind**, the one who **does what they are told**, the **responsible** one. The one who gets **resentful** when a sibling acts out and gets rewarded for it. The one who may have thought or actually said something like, *"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command."* When I was young, being the **older sister**, I was the **dutiful one** and my sister seemed to do a number of things that I didn't. I have to admit that would **frustrate me** sometimes and I would **get angry** with my parents for letting her **get away with**

what I thought was **bad behavior**. But.....it was the **principle** of the thing.

(Ooppss—The **Pharisee** is coming out in me!!!!)

Or we could be the **loving parent** and if you are **not** a parent you could be the **loving friend** who forgives and overlooks the questionable actions of someone that you care about. The one who is **so happy to love and welcome** this son/daughter/friend back. The one who wants **so much to be in relationship** with this person that you are willing to overlook the past, to forgive and forget, to celebrate that the relationship has been restored. To want to **celebrate** so the whole world knows that **all is well** between you now.

As much as **each** of the characters in the parable could be any one of us at sometime in our lives, more than any of the other gospels stories, '*the Parable of Return of the Prodigal Son*' expresses the boundlessness of God's compassion, forgiveness, and love for us—His children. This is a **rich and deeply compelling** story of how much God loves us unconditionally.

There is so much going on in this parable that it would take **weeks** of sermons for us to get through this—the honor/shame society which was in place in Jesus' time is evident, the social norms and laws which were **broken** by the son by asking for his inheritance before his father had died, the disrespecting of his father by the younger son—to not stay and help take care of his father in his old age, the son going way to a '*distant country*' which was not only a **physical** distance but a

psychological distancing from family and community, feeding the pigs—which for a Jew that was about as low as one could go, the father showing compassion and forgiveness by his outlandish behavior of running to greet his son was something **no self respecting man with any dignity** at that time would have done, lifting his long robe to run to greet this son—exposing his legs as he ran—would have been **shameful behavior** to say the least, the elder son who refused to go into the celebration whereby the father went out to talk with him **and** the fact that the father **himself** was risking humiliation and shame by leaving his guests, and the elder son basing his relationship with the father on law, merit, and reward **rather than** love and compassion (*I hope the Pharisees and scribes were listening*): these are just a few of the things which **only scratch the surface** of the depth of this parable.

And we can **only speculate** on the outcome of this story because we are **not told** how it ends but **books** have been written about it, **weeks of bible studies** dig into the layers of it, but the **bottom line** of it comes down to what this parable is all about is the character of God and the unconditional forgiveness of the ‘F’ather.

In this parable what is **so striking** is that with **each of the sons** the father extended unconditional love and acceptance. Through this unconditional love came **total forgiveness** on behalf of **both** of his sons as in the father’s eyes the bond between them had not been severed.

PLEASE HEAR WHAT I AM SAYING HERE: The attitude of the father toward his sons was not determined by their character—but his!!!!

When all is said and done, sinners and Pharisees one and all, we leave **who** we are in the hands of a merciful, loving, and forgiving God who **offers us all He has to give**—His one and only beloved Son who will die for our sins on the cross. This parable clearly portrays the **love and forgiveness** of God as unconditional and it comes to us **even before** we ask for it. God's **mercy** is like that, God's **love** is like that, and God's **forgiveness** is like that. **THANKS BE TO GOD. AMEN.**