

Third Sunday after Trinity, Sunday, July 3, 2022

Readings: Micah 7:18-20, 1 Peter 5:6-11, Luke 15:11-32

Jesus Receives Sinners

"This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). The Pharisees' statement of judgment against Jesus is in fact a proclamation of Gospel truth. For our God is one who delights in mercy, who casts all our sins into the depths of the sea through the cross (Micah 7:18–20). *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"* (1 Tim. 1:15). Those who refuse to be counted as sinners also refuse Jesus who came only for sinners. Those like the older son (Luke 15:11–32), who think they are righteous of themselves, will not join in the heavenly celebration over the sinner who repents and so remain outside of the Father's house. Let us therefore be on guard against self-righteously trusting in our own merits. *"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you"* (1 Peter 5:6). Rejoice that Jesus receives sinners like us and that He still sits at table with us in the Holy Supper, bestowing His forgiveness and life.

Sermon Transcript

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So those of you who been here for the last couple of years probably know about what I'm going to say in this sermon. I had a choice of two Gospel lessons, the prodigal son, and then the other one is the lost sheep and the lost coin. And it's like, how do you cram all of this good stuff into one Sunday and make me choose between the two readings? But I chose the one that is about the "prodigal son." Now, again, I put that in quotes because prodigal is not what I would describe as the son. Although, he is. Prodigal means sort of wanton and wasteful, abundant and abounding, sort of just throwing things out there. And obviously, the son is prodigal in that. He's wasteful of his father's inheritance. He didn't even wait for his dad to die before he said, "Dad, I want your money. I'm not really interested in you. I just want your money. I want the blessings that you have for me. I don't really care about the relationship so much," which is pretty crass when it comes right down to it. If you think about it, I mean, when do you get your inheritance? After the person dies. You could almost put in different words, saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead, so I had the money now. But since you're not dead, can you give me your money now?" I mean, I don't know about you, but as a father, if my son said this to me, I'd kick him out with nothing, "Go fend for yourself if you're so excited about this," but this father, this father...

So, this is not the parable of the prodigal son, even though it's labeled that way. This really is the parable of the prodigal father, the wanton and generous, overgenerous, almost wasteful father. I mean, seriously, he's still alive. He's still got a family to provide for and servants and everything else that he's got. And it only describes one other son, but he might have had other children. And yet he is wasteful in the sense that he gives the portion of his inheritance away to the son who is ungrateful. But he does it joyfully and gladly. We know that he does it joyfully and gladly because he still loves his son, even when his son comes back.

Really, I mean, literally, this man, the young man wasted his money on wine, women and song. I mean, it truly is exactly what he did. Then he became absolutely destitute and finally, finally comes to the realization, "My

dad's pretty generous. Why in the world am I sitting here suffering? He treats his servants better than me right now. I'm sure I could go back and I could get a job as one of his servants." Now, why in the world is the son so certain that he can come back to his father after wasting the inheritance, after thumbing his nose at the father, after basically saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead." Why in the world does this son think that he can come back and the father's going to receive him? Unless the son understands the nature of his father.

See, we hear that we are called to humble ourselves because we are called to cast our anxieties on Him because He cares for us. Even though we are suffering, He will restore. How does it end with 1 Peter? "He will restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you." The son needed restoration. The son needed confirmation and strengthening and establishment. He needed the safety and security that his father had to offer. And he knew that his father had to offer that because his father is a generous prodigal father. Generous beyond a fault, a foolish businessman, but a generous father.

And so the son knew the nature of the father, and that's why he felt comfortable and confident that he could come back and his father would receive him. Because, again, the father is the image of God. I mean, this should be obvious. We're talking about the nature of God here. And we hear already in Micah, "Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in steadfast love." Is God angry at sin? Absolutely. Does He promise judgment for sin? Yes, He does. But in theological terms, that is His alien work. His anger and His judgment is foreign to His nature. He must do it because He is a just God. And therefore, He will do what is just, even if that means judging you and me on our sin.

But because His nature, His true nature, is that of prodigal, generous, forgiving, merciful. His desire is to somehow take away the judgment that we rightly deserve and give us His love instead. And so He rejoices when we humble ourselves, when we confess our sins, when we recognize, as this son did, that we are unworthy to be called the children. Now, in spite of us being unworthy, we are not considered servants and slaves. And this is the interesting part about the son's speech. You can see the son working it out as he's traveling back to his homeland, "Okay. Let's see, Dad, you're..." Going through several different speeches, trying to figure out what he's going to say. Finally comes up with, "I'm not worthy. I've sinned against you and against God."

Good start. Starts out completely confessing everything, just admitting it without trying to justify or somehow make himself not so bad. He just flat, "I've sinned against you and against God." All right. That makes sense. That is good. "I am not worthy to be called your son." That is also true. You and I are also not worthy to be called children of God because we have sinned. We have received the blessings of God and maybe not taken them too seriously. We look forward to His blessings, but we don't want to think about the suffering that may come, that will come. It says that, "The adversary is prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." If we're looking only for blessing, only for peace and all the good stuff that comes, we fail to understand the nature of this fallen world.

Because there is sin in the world and because we are tempted into that sin, there is a devil waiting around to devour us. And if we take the blessings of God and just ignore the rest of it, if we just look to the good and don't remember the cost of receiving that good, the death of His Son, Jesus Christ, it'd be very easy for us to fall into temptation, to run away. Or the second son, perhaps we're like the second son. We see somebody getting the blessings of God, and we know absolutely they do not deserve it. And then we grumble and

complain, "I have been your faithful servant for all these years, and I'm still working hard. And you have never, you've never given me a calf that I might celebrate or a goat that I might celebrate with my friends."

Really? This generous man who gave away the inheritance, half of the property, practically, to the younger son has never been generous to the older son? I think that's some selective memory going on there with the older son. He is frustrated because he thinks he deserves the blessings of his father. He knows his brother doesn't deserve the blessings, but he sure thinks he does. But notice the father in both circumstances, with both of the sons, had to go and meet them. Well, actually the first one, he didn't have to go, but he chose to go because he desired that his son might receive relief from his anxieties and cares and burdens as soon as possible. So while he was yet a long way off, the father goes running to the son and forgives him.

In the second instance, the son is sitting in the backyard going, "I'm not going to go in there. I'm going to be..." just grumbling. And the father goes out to him as well, because he sees his son, his second son, or his older son, a long ways off. Maybe not physically but emotionally that son is a long ways off from his father. And he goes to him and draws him back into a loving relationship. You see, none of us deserve to be called the children of God, but we get to because of His grace and his mercy. Because He is prodigal. He is prodigal with His blessings of forgiveness. He will restore, He will confirm, He will strengthen, and He will establish you. There's not a whole lot of a long list of things that you're supposed to do. It's all Him doing it for you.

That is the gift that we have today. That is the gift we have every day. This is why we can put all of our anxieties on Him. And just a note about the devil prowling around like a roaring lion. Usually, it's not the one making the noise that you need to be afraid of. The one making the noise is driving you to the trap that is set for you. See, Satan basically has no teeth unless you give it to him, unless you give him the ability. He has no ability to trap you, to deceive you, to take you from the Kingdom of God. But he's sure going to scare you and see if he can drive you away from the Father and from His love.

And when you start looking at the roaring lion rather than the Almighty God and Father, then you get off course, then you wander. But He calls us to focus upon Him so that our anxieties are in Him, are trusted in His power and authority. And we don't look at the roaring lion anymore because we're not afraid, because the Father is there to protect us, to care for us, to give us prodigal mercy and grace beyond measure, filled up. Overflowing is His love for us, undeserved though we are. He has taken His justice and His wrath and His anger against sin, and He has placed it upon Jesus, and He has given us His grace and His mercy and His love. Hold firm to that and you will not be anxious about anything.

May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen.