

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
5327 W. Washington Blvd.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 18, 2007  
Luke 15:1-3; 11-32

*"Rejoice! The Father Welcomes Us!"*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Some of you may remember the time years ago when the Sundays in Lent had Latin names. Those Latin names came from the first word of the introit for the Sunday. In fact, if you would look in the front of the old Lutheran Hymnal, you would find a listing of those names on the church calendar page. The reason why I bring this up is that this Sunday would be "Laetare" according to those Latin names for the Sundays in Lent. "Laetare" means rejoice. That seems to be an unusual thing to do during this penitential season of the church year, but experts on the liturgy have pointed out that this particular Sunday (about midway through Lent) was an opportunity in the medieval church to relax a few of the heavy restrictions placed upon the people of God during Lent. Now, of course, today, there are few if any restrictions which people observe during this season, but the idea that this morning is "Rejoice Sunday" is still very appropriate. And that thought fits very well with the Holy Gospel for this morning, the beautiful and familiar parable of the prodigal son. For we would consider that story under the theme: "Rejoice! The Lost is Found!"

I. The Prodigal Son

Jesus told this parable as the third of three as part of a discussion with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who complained that He welcomed sinners and ate with them. The first parable was the Lost sheep, the second, the Lost coin, and the third, the lost (or prodigal) son. We probably know the story quite well but listen again to the opening words of it: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 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." Of course, the parable that refers to the heavenly Father and the younger son is so representative of many who think the grass is greener somewhere else, away from the Father's house. We may very well know people just like this ourselves. We may ourselves have been that person. But the actions of this son were not at all unpredictable for they show the results of sin in all of our lives. We all would want to free ourselves to do our own things. We all hear the same tempting voice that spoke from the tree in the garden to Eve: "You will be as gods".

Even in some churches today there is the idea that to be successful you have to follow this advice: "We give people what they want". And those churches are filled but what is the flock really receiving? What people want is not always what they need. The prodigal son wanted his share of the estate. He received it and promptly squandered it.

## II. Repentance

Jesus continued: "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 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 servants.'" (v.14-19) Tragically, people often learn that what they thought they needed was not the case at all. Even more tragically, some never learn that lesson in this life and spend all their time feeding with the pigs for they have lost all sense of dignity and responsibility.

But this was not the case with this younger son. As Jesus said, he came to his senses. There could be no greater sense of shame for a Jewish lad than to be found living with the swine. He realized that even the hired servants of his Father were more blessed than he was in his present state. And yet in coming to his senses, he also showed what makes true repentance. He turned around his life and headed home. He confessed his sin: "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your Son." In this Lenten season, we are all called to consider our lives and what they could be. We are called upon to repent. It is most proper that in our Sunday worship services we begin them by confessing our sins. For we too cannot come before our Father in heaven without recognizing who we are before his holy presence, that all our so-called righteousnesses are nothing but filthy rags.

## III. Forgiveness

And with confession and the realization of sin there comes forgiveness. The closing section of the parable is truly a worthy and blessed example of the love of the Father for all of his children. For as Jesus taught: "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. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate." (v.20-24) What love the father showed for his lost son. He was looking for him even as he returned. The prodigal never even had the chance to make his request to be merely considered as a hired servant. His father was too busy receiving him back again as his son. The father welcomed him. The lost was found.

There could be no more remarkable picture of the love which God has for each of us than that shown in this parable. And of course, we know that that love came about through God's

own Son who took our place and was literally lost for us. It is as St. Paul writes in the Epistle for this morning that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. God made Jesus his Son, who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. It is through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior that our Father in heaven makes us His children. He welcomes us home. We are given the robe of righteousness in the blood of Jesus Christ. We are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb as the guests of honor. God has opened the way for us to be his children again. We who once were lost are now found in Him.

#### IV. Rejoice

In the parable of the prodigal Son, the household celebrates his return. "And they began to celebrate." Well, almost everyone. The older brother felt cheated. How can you throw a party for that rotten brother of mine? But the Father reminds him that the celebration is for one who was lost and is now found. And that brings us back to this "Laetare" Sunday--rejoice. In the verse immediately before the parable of the prodigal Son Jesus says, "There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Such joy in heaven results over one repentant sinner. How true it is that there is joy in heaven when the people of God, his holy church gather before his altar and in his presence to hear the Word, to rejoice in the promise of forgiveness, to partake of the body and blood of His Son in the sacrament of the altar which is a sure sign and seal of the forgiveness won for each of us. In this way there can be rejoicing even in the midst of Lent--a season of solemn preparation. For we know full well that Easter follows Lent, that the victory has been won and that our Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished it all for us. So let us rejoice. But let us also remember the lost sons and daughters, the prodigals of the world. They too need to know that the Lord is calling them to repentance and faith. Often people who have fallen away or distanced themselves from the church have done so because they feel they are not worth God's love and that they are unworthy and lost. Or, they think that their sin is too great to be forgiven. Sometimes even people in the church display that attitude toward them. There is a little of the older brother in us at times. But think of the prodigal Son. Think of the love of the father for his wandering child. Think of the Father's welcome. Then think of the love of our Father in heaven for the whole world. Think of the promise and assurance of forgiveness. For the word of the father in our text is the word of our heavenly Father as well, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And so we can rejoice, even as the hymn writer reminds us:

Today your mercy calls us,  
to wash away our sin.  
However great our trespass,  
whatever we have been.  
However long from mercy  
our hearts have turned away  
Your precious blood can cleanse us  
and make us clean today.

Today your gate is open  
and all who enter in  
Shall find a Father's welcome  
and pardon for their sin.  
The past shall be forgotten,  
a present joy be giv'n.  
A future grace be promised,  
a glorious crown in heaven.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.