

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 14, 2010  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

*“Two Sons and A Loving Father”*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

The text before us is truly one of the most striking and beautiful of the parables which our Lord Jesus taught. It is one of the most well known stories of the Bible and one of the unique contributions of the Gospel of St. Luke. Yet it has probably been misnamed. We know of it as the parable of the Prodigal Son – in actuality it is the story of two sons, one who was lost when he went away, the other who was lost though never going anywhere. In addition it is the story of a loving and forgiving father who cares deeply for both of his sons. As we look at this parable this morning we are directed to an important spiritual question regarding our relationship with our Lord. For there are times when we might fit the attitude of one or the other of the two lost sons. May the Lord direct our study of His Word as we consider the theme: Two Sons and a Loving Father.

I. The Prodigal

Jesus told this parable in connection with two others—the lost sheep and the lost coin. He told all of them in response to the accusation of the scribes and Pharisees that he sat with sinners and ate with them. In a real sense, these parables are all an indictment of the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and religious leaders, especially this parable of the prodigal son. But let us consider for a moment his condition. He makes a remarkable request, unheard of in the milieu of the Middle East at any time. He wants his father to give him his portion of the inheritance. In a real sense, he was wishing that his father was dead for that was truly the only way one could receive an inheritance. Yet his father grants his request, gives him his inheritance and he sets out for a far country where he promptly squanders it all. In the days that follow, in the famine that comes, he finds himself hungry and lonely. He is reduced to feeding pigs and attempting to live on the food the pigs consume. In such a time, he realizes that things would be better at home. But he also knows that he cannot return in the same way. He will come to his father and say, “I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired servants.” At this point he still wants to be somewhat in charge. He will work off his debt. He will make it right. He recognizes his sin and his failings but his repentance is not complete.

As he nears his home, however, his father sees him coming. His father runs to him and embraces him with joy and love. The lost son attempts his little speech, he tells his father “I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But he gets no farther. For his father in love and joy restores him with a robe and a ring and shoes on his feet and a feast to celebrate the son who was lost but is found who was dead but is alive again.

Perhaps there are some here today or listening on the radio who could well identify with this prodigal son. There are certainly many in the world who fall into that category who have wasted the grace and love of the Father and who have turned their backs on their true and eternal home. They are very much interested in heading off into a far country and losing their inheritance to the things of this world especially as the world with all its temptations would lead so many away from the will of God. Lent is a season of repentance. This is a good text to remind us of the importance of that as well as to call us to consider our relationship with our Lord. For He would have us turn from our sin to a new life as His sons and daughters.

## II. The Elder Son

But the parable does not end with the restoration of the prodigal son. Jesus also speaks about the elder son as well. When he finds out about the party in honor of his younger brother he is infuriated. He angrily asks his father how could this happen that such honor is shown to one who had so foolishly squandered his inheritance. He is angered that he has faithfully served in his father's household but never once received such a lavish meal in his honor. All of these things he says to his father—in a rather harsh and disrespectful way. He even accuses his younger brother of squandering his inheritance with prostitutes—something that he could know nothing about. He will not even recognize his brother for he calls him “this son of yours.” One commentator points out that the older son commits seven insults in the presence of his father, which again is unthinkable in a Middle Eastern setting. To which the father again patiently and lovingly tells his older son that he is always with him and all he has is his and that they must rejoice for his brother who was lost and is found, was dead and is alive again.

Now in the attitude of this elder son we see a temptation which can very well befall Christian people. They may not even know it is happening to them. “What do those people think they are doing coming to this church?” “What does he think he is doing here after those terrible things he did?” “Who does she think she is joining us after living such a scandalous life?” People can get very self-righteous and self-important. It is tragically the case that they can also feel more important by putting others down. Rather than rejoicing with the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents as our Lord says with certainty, it is often easier to grumble and complain. The older son often has lots of company in the church.

## III. The Forgiving Father

But if we end there this morning we will have failed to see the most important application of the words of our Lord in this parable. Yes, he was warning the self-righteous and yes he was teaching of the importance of repentance but above all in the tender accepting love of the father in the parable we have a reminder of the great love of Him who sat with sinners and ate with them. We remember the One who looked for the outcast, the tax collector, the “sinner” and who called upon them to share in the new life which He brings. We have the sure sign of the love of God the Father in His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. It is God who waits

for us with open arms. It is God who rushes out to meet His wayward child on the way. It is God who puts a robe around us and a ring of adoption on our finger, and shoes to stand before Him. It is God who throws a feast of rejoicing for each of His children whom He calls "Son". And God does it His way not ours. In the epistle for this morning, St. Paul writes that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself not counting their trespasses against them ... God made "him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." There is where the hope of our adoption as God's forgiven children rests in the fact that God did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all that we might be his children forever. That is the message of Lent, the central theme of our salvation.

In the first epistle of John, the apostle writes, "See what love the Father has shown us, that we might be called the children of God." What love indeed, it is the welcoming love, the forgiving love of a Father who waits for his prodigal to return. It is the love of our great God.

### Conclusion

For many years this Fourth Sunday in Lent was known by its Latin name, "Laetare" which means rejoice. In the midst of the Lenten fast, the church paused if you will to thank God for his love. The parable before us today also includes that sign of celebration. For the one who was lost but now found, for the one who was dead but is alive again, "and they began to celebrate." Each and every time we gather in the Lord's house, we celebrate that forgiving grace and love of our God. I would ask you to turn to hymn 744 as we sing the beloved words of John Newton, former slave-ship captain and later a Christian pastor. Stanza 1 of hymn 744. They are the words of the returned prodigal son:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.