

Psalm 32  
Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
March 27, 2022

## **A Prodigal Son Comes Home**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

In our Psalm for this Fourth Sunday in Lent, we hear of the blessedness, the healing power of God's forgiveness. Yes, there is the reality of sin. But by God's grace, sin does not have the last word. Listen to these words from Psalm 32...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson this morning from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke we have the familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son. Even in these days of biblical illiteracy, many people are familiar with the story. It has been the subject of musicians and artists. Some of you may recall our Daytrip to Montreat and visiting The Chapel of the Prodigal, with its enormous fresco painting beautifully portraying the parable. The younger of two sons takes his inheritance and proceeds to throw it away in a distant land and winds up feeding pigs. But when he comes home, his loving father runs to greet him. Listen to these words from Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-32...

### *Sermon*

In chapter 15 Luke joins three stories linked by a common theme—rejoicing over the *lost* which is *found*. The tax collectors and sinners have drawn near to listen to Jesus, while the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling about his eating with the likes of such. “If he were a true prophet, he ought to support holiness. He's a distinguished leader, yet his behavior is giving us a bad name.” *But*—“to seek and save the lost” is Jesus' stated purpose, as noted in his later conversation with the outcast tax collector, Zacchaeus:

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

In Luke 15 we find three familiar parables: First, the Parable of the Lost Sheep; Second, The Parable of the Lost Coin; and then in a third story, which is found in our lesson for today, Jesus tells of a father of two sons, the younger of which wanted what was coming to him and he wanted it now, not as was the custom of dividing property after the death of the father in accordance with his last will. What this son did with that inheritance was his own business. And what he did was squander it in riotous living in the far country, throwing “the pearl of his soul into a cup of wine.” Finally, he was reduced to feeding pigs—a humiliating and shameful job for a Jew. But then one day, while sitting among the swine, the young man “came to himself.”

William Barclay says that those words paid sinning human the greatest compliment ever paid. That Jesus believed that when a person was cut off from God and against God, he was not truly himself. That when he came to himself, he was back in relationship with God. He was on the way home. Seeing him in the distance, the father runs to greet him. The son acknowledges his sin and unworthiness.

Yes, the father had been waiting in that peculiar agony of hope and fear—hope that his son would return safely, fear that he would destroy himself in a distant land. And, upon seeing his son in the distance, the father ran to him and embraced him. Neighbors would have seen the rags, the dirt, the bare feet, the disgrace, but the father saw his *son*. Then the son confesses:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Before he can finish with the words, “Now make me one of your hired servants,” the father shows that regardless of what the son has done, he is still his son, still loved, still wanted. Clean clothes, a ring, and shoes are to be brought for him. And the father calls for a celebration, a feast, a banquet. For a son who was as good as dead, is alive again; he was lost and is found. “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” has rightly been called, “The Parable of the Loving Father.”

However, there is one who resists, and he is the elder son—the obedient brother who had stayed home, but whose heart was lost. We don't know if he ever celebrated or not. He was certainly in no mood to rejoice right now, resentful of the love this “rotten brother” is shown, and as it turns out, resentful of all his own years of service to his father—seeing them as a kind of unrewarded slavery, instead of his contribution to a kingdom that is already his. In a real sense, it is now the elder son who is in the far country.

John Newton, the English cleric who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace” in 1779, could easily identify with the prodigal son. Born to a devoted mother and a merchant ship captain, as a young man Newton left home and went to sea. There he became involved in the transatlantic slave trade as “an easy and creditable way of life.” He largely abandoned the religion of his childhood and was highly critical of the Christian faith. It was only in later years that he realized that he had wasted his young life, and had been offensive to God and to all God-fearing people.

His resulting experience of God's forgiveness, of God's grace, is well described in the words of his great hymn:

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.

It is also to be found in his epitaph, an epitaph he himself wrote shortly before his death in 1807.

He describes himself and his experience in this way:

John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.

Indeed, many people have known John Newton's experience of the love of God. They have discovered that no matter how far they have fallen, no matter that their sins are as scarlet, and no matter how intensely they have turned away from and rejected God and his church, that

God's love is steadfast, and he longs for them to return, to come home, to take their place in the family of God.

Luke 15 begins with a complaint by the Pharisees and scribes regarding Jesus' welcoming and eating with sinners. It ends with a father's welcome to an errant younger son and a plea to an elder son to join his neighbors and his younger brother for a banquet, marking the restoration of proper relations among the members of the family and the wider community. A brother as good as dead has come to life. A lost son is found.

As we reflect on this story, we may think about how much suffering and brokenness *carelessness* can bring in human relationships. A word spoken in anger, or that was not meant as it sounded, may cause wounds that are not easily healed. A misunderstanding may send people in different directions. A lack of attention to some minor detail may have consequences seemingly quite out of proportion. A brief distraction in the far country may lead to a lifetime of misery. It may take strenuous effort to adjust to some act of carelessness so that all of life is not marred.

Ministers and their families are not immune to such hardship. Do you remember Robert Redford's 1992 movie *A River Runs Through It*? It was based on Norman Maclean's semi-autobiographical book. The story is set in western Montana at the junction of great trout rivers. The author's father is a Presbyterian minister and an avid fly fisherman. He and his wife raise two sons: Norman, who will become a teacher and writer, and Paul, who will work for a newspaper and excel at fly fishing. Norman marries and raises a family. Paul leads a life of drinking and gambling—ending up getting killed in a fight. Heartache through misguided choices was no stranger to these good parents and loving brother. Yet, in one of his final sermons Rev. Maclean says, "You can love completely without complete understanding."

Psalm 32, our Old Testament reading today, celebrates the forgiving love of God. The devastating nature of human sin is acknowledged, but the healing of brokenness through confession and repentance is celebrated. As we read in Psalm 32, verses 3-5:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.  
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin

St. Augustine thought so much of this Psalm that he had it written out and placed upon a wall near his bed.

My friends, "The Parable of the Loving Father" calls us to let go of all that impedes the restoration of brokenness; to let go of the weights and sins which do so easily beset; and to seek that which will nurture the spiritual growth of the self and others.

So, let us move away from Pharisee and elder brother judgment, which builds barriers rather than bridges. Let us love completely, even though we cannot completely understand. Let us move toward acceptance and new beginnings. And joy in the healing of brokenness. Joy in the restoration of persons to their rightful place. Joy in the lost being found.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.