

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2013

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable (11) Jesus continued: "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. 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 men 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 men.' 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. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

An 80 year old man was sitting on the sofa in his house with his 45 year old, highly educated, son. Suddenly a crow perched on their window. The father asked his son, "What is this?" The son replied: "It is a crow". After a few minutes, the father asked his son the 2nd time, "What is this?" The son said: "Father, I have just now told you, "It's a crow". After a little while, the elderly father again asked his son a 3rd time, "What is this?" At this time some expression of irritation was felt in the son's tone when he said to his father with a rebuff. "It's a crow, a crow, a crow". A little after, the father again asked his son the 4th time, "What is this?" This time the son shouted at his father,

“Why do you keep asking me the same question again and again, although I have told you so many times ‘IT IS A CROW’. Are you not able to understand this?” A little later the father went to his room and came back with an old tattered diary, which he had maintained since his son was born. He opened a page and asked his son to read that page. When the son read it, the following words were written in the diary: - *“Today my little son, age three, was sitting with me on the sofa, when a crow came and sat on the window. My son asked me 23 times what it was, and I replied to him all 23 times that it was a crow. I hugged him lovingly each time he asked me the same question again and again for 23 times.”*

What a wonderful thing it is to have a loving dad, one who is patient and kind, one who listens and is there for you. Numerous studies have been done about how many people long for the love & the approval of a father. There is something very special about a father’s love. And while I can’t talk with certainty about all of our earthly father’s this morning, I want to remind all of you that you have such love from a Father. Today, we listen to a story about an earthly father which illustrates the love of our true Father in heaven. It demonstrates His love that surpasses what any earthly father could give us. I pray as we hear this Word of God we: **Behold the Father’s love!**

When studying any parable it is of great help to remember the context in which the parable was taught. Here some Pharisees and teachers of the law were muttering over the fact that Jesus welcomes and eats with tax collectors and sinners. So ***“Jesus told them this parable.”*** Actually, He teaches three parables with the same general truth: God wants to save sinners. He wants to seek and save the lost. This point is clear in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. In these parables we also see how God rejoices, and the angels with Him, over one sinner who repents - over one lost soul that is found.

Now, this third parable is along these same lines. This parable of the prodigal son is probably one of the most familiar ones in the Bible. The beauty of it lies in its simplicity. The facts don’t need much explanation. A father has two sons, and the younger asks for his share of the inheritance, gets it, and then takes off to live on his own. This son goes to a distant country and squanders his wealth in wild living. He had no need for his father. He wants to be his own boss. He does what he wants to do – evidently even wasting his inheritance on prostitutes. He wants to eat, drink, and be merry. Yet, after some time He realizes that without his father life isn’t as great as he expected it to be. A famine hits. His money runs out. His so-called friends abandon him. He is hired by a citizen to work in the fields and watch the pigs. This job would be as bad as it gets for a Jewish person! Not only did he have to care for these pigs but even they had it better as he longs to eat the share of pods that are fed to the pigs, ***“but no one gave him anything.”*** This son had hit rock bottom!

Coming to his senses, this son says, ***“How many of my father’s hired men 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 one of your hired men.”*** The son realized he had sinned, both against God and his father. He realized that without his father he is lost. He is even described, later by the father, as dead. He decides to offer himself to be his father’s servant, because he doesn’t deserve to be called a son.

As the son heads for home we now get to the best part of the parable. If we focus too much attention on the actions of the sons we miss the heart of the awesome message before us. Behold the Father's love! The father sees his son still a long way off and is filled with compassion. This son can't look very good as he returns home. He is starving, and probably smelly and dirty. But his father runs out to him. Before the son can say a word, the father throws his arms around him and kisses his neck, a sign of forgiveness. The son confesses his sin, and says: ***"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."*** But the father calls his servants to bring out the best robe and put it on his boy. He puts a ring on his hand, a true sign of sonship and sandals on his feet - not something the servants would wear. He prepares the fattened calf, something that was reserved for a guest of honor and only for a rare special occasion. The father gets ready to throw a big party. It is time for a celebration, for as the father says: ***"This son of mine was dead and is alive; he was lost and now is found."***

That is love – unconditional, committed, forgiving, and unfailing love. Behold the Father's love! And as the celebration begins the father in this story shows his love once again because he now has another lost son to seek and save. The older son was in the field working, and when he returned, he hears the music and dancing. The servant's tell him that his brother is back, and his father has killed the fattened calf. But instead of rejoicing, the older brother is angry and refuses to go in. So the father comes out and pleads with him to join in the celebration. But the older brother complains that he had been faithful but that he and his friends never received the fattened calf. How can this worthless ***"son of yours,"*** as the older brother calls him, get this warm welcome home? Listen again to this father reach out in love to his older son in an attempt to open his eyes. ***"My son,' the father says, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."***

And with this Jesus ends the parable. We are not told how the Pharisees and teachers of the law who shunned Jesus for eating with sinners reacted to this lesson. But it is clear that they were the ones acting like the older brother. It was clear they were the ones who had a problem with God's gracious way of dealing with sinners. Jesus wants them to behold the Father's love!

Jesus wants us to do the same. What son are we? Perhaps we see a bit of both of the sons in us. When we sin we are telling our Father in heaven we want to be our own boss. We want to go our own way and do our own thing. But if we stay on that path sooner or later no matter what we have, without our Father, it will all be gone. Money, possessions, even friends and family are things that will not last forever. Without our heavenly Father we will never find lasting happiness. That is why God uses His Word to bring us to our senses. Have you ever hit rock bottom? Then thank God for it. Because God wants us to realize it is better to be a doorman in heaven than a prince of hell. We are much better off as one of God's servants, than to remain on our own, spiritually lost & dead. Like this son, I pray we realize we are not worthy to be called His son.

On the other side do we ever see the older son in us? There is a little Pharisee in each of us. It is so easy to begin to think that we are a little more deserving of the Father's love and think of others as not worthy of going to heaven. Do we ever raise our eyebrows when that person who has made many mistakes, or has committed what we consider gross sins, comes through our doors to receive forgiveness and a gracious

reception from our Father? Do we think we are more worthy because of our faithfulness to our heavenly Father? Do we ever fail to rejoice with the angels in heaven, to celebrate when one sinner repents? Do we ever consider God's way of dealing with sinners as foolishness and actually get upset with His grace?

Then behold again the Father's love! Watch again as He calls both sons to repentance. This father loves even the worst of sinners - even the son who embarrassed and abandoned the father - even the one who was not worthy to be called a son. He loves even the son who is filled with sinful pride and jealousy and doesn't want that son to miss out on the celebration of his love either. Sounds very familiar, doesn't it? We too have a Father who ***“does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103)***. We have a Father who gives us the best robe. He robes us in the righteousness of Christ. Our Father gives us the ring of true sonship. For ***“When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Galatians 3)***.

By grace we know why our Father does not treat us as our sins deserve. He treated Jesus with what our sins deserve. God doesn't demand we repay this debt our sins have run up against Him. We never could. Instead, Jesus paid our debt for us. He redeemed us, that is He bought us back, and the price was His precious blood and His innocent suffering and death on the cross. The seal of our sonship and our eternal inheritance was stamped complete when Jesus rose from the dead of the third day. Through Jesus, the Father's arms have been opened wide in order to welcome all sinners into them. This is the point I pray we don't miss today in this familiar parable. Behold the Father's love. It is a wonderful thing to a Father in heaven who is kind and patient, who forgives and listens, and who pours out on us one undeserved blessing after another. This is worthy of a celebration every week! Amen.