

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The story Jesus tells in the Gospel lesson for today is one of the most favorite and best known of his stories. It is traditionally entitled, “The Prodigal Son,” “Prodigal” meaning someone who spends a lot, or uses a lot. Some scholars prefer to call this the story of the extravagant son and the resentful elder brother. My favorite is something along the lines of the story of the ridiculously, preposterously, abundantly, foolishly forgiving and loving father.

The story emerges from a conversation with the Pharisees, who are a party in ancient Jewish society. The Pharisees were very religious people. They worked hard. They followed all the rules, even made up some of their own. Which is not a problem. It is good to be religious, to engage in some kind of spiritual practice, to remind ourselves of the image of God in which we are made, of God’s dreams and demands that we live according to that image, of Jesus’s redemption and of God’s presence with us now. It is good to be religious. It is good to work hard. It is good to follow the rules. Almost all the time, this is the right thing to do.

The problem with the Pharisees is not that they are religious or hard working or that they follow the rules. The problem is that they think their religion and their hard work and their rules give them the right to despise people that they don’t think measure up. The problem is that they insist that everyone else think like them, believe like them, look like them act like them. That’s the problem.

Pharisees grumble because Jesus is hanging out with the wrong kind of people. Jesus is hanging out with sinners: drug dealers and prostitutes and pimps and liars, people

who steal, people who break up marriages by committing adultery. We don't want any of those kind of people in the church.

Jesus tells three stories in reply to the Pharisees. The first is also rather familiar. He tells about a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep out in the field alone and unprotected in order to come and find you. You and me, when we get do confused or angry or prideful or afraid that we wander off. And the shepherd goes and finds the lost sheep, just as God comes to find you, and when God finds you, which he will, he puts you on his shoulder and carries you back home, calls all his friends and neighbors together and says "Come, rejoice with me because I have found my sheep that was lost.

Then Jesus tells another story. This makes the same point. This time, God is not like a shepherd, but rather like a woman. A woman loses one of her ten coins. So, she lights a lamp and sweeps and sweeps and searches all day until she finds it. Which she will find it. God will find you and me, no matter how desperately we have hidden, and then God calls all her friends and neighbors together and says, "rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

This happens to you and me every day. A happy ending. God finds us and brings us back to God's life, into God's home, into God's family.

Except, is this what life is really like? Is home always a happy ending. What about family?

When I was thinking about going to seminary, I lived in Dallas Texas. I saw a church, huge box store kind of church, rising up over the trees. You could see it from far away. It had a banner that was, like two or three stories high. It said one word, "Family." Family. That's what you would find at church. Back then, it would be the nice family with a house with a white picket fence around it, with a husband, a wife and some kids. An Idyllic vision.

The implied message: if you are religious enough, if you work hard enough, if you obey all the rules, then you will get this reward: a family.

But are families always a reward? Mind you, there are more healthy ways to be family and less healthy ways to be family. We can have more happy times in families

and less happy. But no family is ever perfect. No family will fulfill all our needs or make us who we are. No family ever will be heaven.

That's kind of good news, because if families were supposed to be heaven, then we would all be in a lot of trouble, wouldn't we.

In families, real families, there is pain. All families have pain. Our families here at St. John, have pain. You all have honored me by sharing some of your families' pain. Many of you. Most of you, even. Families are wonderful, holy, powerful, beautiful. Families have pain.

In the third story, we get to our Gospel lesson for today, where Jesus tells about a family that has pain. It is our family, the human family, God's family.

He says a father had two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance immediately, before the father dies, implying that the younger son doesn't care about his father. He just wants the money. Ever feel like someone cared more about your money than they cared about you? That hurts.

Younger son runs off, we don't know why. Cut himself off from family. You know of people in our families that cut themselves off, or that the family had cut off, severed, exiled? That hurts.

Younger son comes back, now the elder brother is mad and cuts himself off from the celebration.

This is a family with pain. God's family is a family with pain.

Now look at the father. What does the father do with the pain? Foolish father. When the younger son appears far down the road, the father runs to him.

In first century society, if you were the patriarch or the matriarch of a family, especially a family with enough wealth to own land, to hire servants and have slaves, you did not run. You strode purposefully across your acres, making sure they were cared for properly. You processed in and out among your people, making sure everything was done appropriately. You did not hike up your robes and let the entire world see your knobby knees and ankles ankles flashing in the sunlight. You did not run.

The ridiculously, preposterously, abundantly, foolishly forgiving and loving father runs.

When the elder brother is so mad that his father has given a party for his deadbeat brother that he will not enter the house, he has cut himself off now, too, right? That's pain. The father comes out again. He came out for the younger brother, now he comes out for the elder brother. The father comes out and pleads with him.

In the first century society, if you were a father in a family, especially a family of means, you did not plead. You especially did not plead with your children. The ridiculously, preposterously, abundantly, foolishly forgiving and loving father pleads.

We are both the younger son and the older son. This is our family. We waste the gift God gives us. We waste our relationships, we waste our bodies, we waste this bright creation around us. We are also the elder brother. We refuse to be a part of God's mercy for those, wrong kinds of people. God's family is not perfect. God's family is not idyllic. God's family has pain.

God comes out to us, nonetheless, always. God loves us, always, even with the pain.

This last story does not have a happy ending. In fact, it does not have an ending at all. We are left up in the air. What will the elder brother do? What will we religious people do? Will we enter the party, even though it causes us pain? Will we stay outside forever, to avoid the pain?

Listen to the God who has found you like a shepherd finds his lost sheep. Listen to the God who has found you like a woman finds her lost coin. Listen to the God who runs to you, who pleads with you, who ridiculously, preposterously, abundantly, foolishly loves you and forgives you, even in the midst of pain.