

**SERMON Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 30th, 2025, Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
Emmanuel Lutheran in Lancaster, Pa. Rev. Timothy W. Sadler**

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

The parable of the prodigal son. The word “prodigal” isn’t here in Scripture, but we’ve heard it so often we automatically think of this word whenever we read this story. I looked up the word “prodigal” in the dictionary. It means—wastefully extravagant, yielding in profusion, bountiful, lavish, and profuse. In other words, the son’s wastefulness was so extravagant—to such an extent—that he can be labeled the prodigal.

This is a very comforting story for those who’ve strayed: for those who’ve ever abused a child, swindled money from trusted friends; for those who’ve spilled toxic chemicals, betrayed trust, wasted their lives on drugs or alcohol.

Never mind, this parable says, you can still come home.

But there’s another part of this story too: the older brother, the 99 sheep left unattended while the shepherd goes out to find the one who is lost. They have a legitimate grievance.

Do we honestly expect the older brother to welcome back the abuser, the person who swindled their savings, the one who betrayed their trust?

And what about the returning son?

Will he understand the graciousness of the gift he’s been given, and not be tempted to use it or abuse it, or take it for granted?

OR-will he be tempted to see it as cheap grace—the kind that asks nothing of him—that seeks no love response, no change of heart or life?

OR- will he have trouble believing it at all, and continue to carry a burden of overwhelming guilt?

I know I said this before, but one of the things Scripture does is pull us into the story by getting us to identify with the different people in it. So—who do you feel the most like today? The prodigal son who’s wasted everything.

OR- the older brother who’s done the daily work and kept things going?

You know as I thought about it—I think there’s a little of the prodigal son AND the older brother in each of us. It’s like Paul talked about-wanting to do good but never quite getting it right as we are both saint and sinner.

But I also think that recognizing that we each have some of both sons in us isn’t a bad thing, because it makes it possible for us to understand that everyone else in existence has the same exact struggle

And sometimes that struggle tips one way where we are a little more wasteful—uncaring of God’s world and His presence in our lives. And then it tips the other, and we become more willing to hear and to obey. And that struggle will continue as long as we live this life.

Do you realize that this is another parable in which we don’t know exactly how it ends? Does the older son go into the joy of the father? Is he willing to allow the graciousness of his father to touch not only his younger brother’s life...but his own life as well?

The older brother is only resentful because he doesn’t think his younger brother deserves to come home and share the father’s love. So, what does that say about how he sees his own place in the family—as something he has earned?

AND does he honestly believe that he has lived such a perfect life that he requires no forgiveness of any kind?

What the older brother fails to realize is that he too is a member of that family because of the father’s grace. That older son didn’t win his place by his father’s side; he’s there simply because the father chooses to love him and to share with him all that the father has.

What the father gives to both sons is a gift. That kind of love can’t be earned or demanded. If the older son wanted, he could be in there with the father, welcoming the brother home. Everything the father has is already his...so he could open his arms wide in welcome and allow the grace of the father to flow through him.

There is room in this family for those who want to come home to God. It doesn’t matter where they’ve been or how they’ve lived, or how long they’ve been away. Here, there is room.

If prodigal means extravagant –

If prodigal means wasteful, bountiful, lavish, profuse—

Then this story would be better titled the prodigal father, because the father’s grace is far greater and more extravagant than anything the younger son had done.

And if the father’s mercy is large enough to welcome home the son who was steeped in wasted living, then it’s also large enough to hold the older son who stands outside the party sulking, and telling his father “It just isn’t fair.”

What the older son doesn’t understand is that mercy and grace are NEVER fair. If God was really fair, then he’d have to deal with each one of us according to what we deserve, and every one of us would lose—

Whether we’re the older son or the young one returning home—

We would lose.

We are here, every one of us—in this family—because God isn’t fair. We’re here because God sets aside fairness in order to be merciful.

This parable has a lot to say to those of us in the church and how we welcome people into our midst. If we feel like the older son—that this is our rightful place—than we'll have trouble moving over and making room for others to enter in.

Anytime we look at another human being and judge them as less than ourselves, rather than seeing someone who needs Jesus just like you and I, we'll have trouble welcoming them into this church family---and taking them into our lives and hearts.

What Jesus wants to know is this: is there room here—at Emmanuel—for more than just the older sons?

I'm sure that those who saw the younger son in his partying days must have thought he was a hopeless case. I'm sure that those who saw him sitting in the fields starving, smelly, and longing to eat the pig's food...must have thought he couldn't possible sink any lower, and that he was irretrievably lost.

I'm sure, for some of us, at one time or another we may have thought the same about ourselves.

But God's grace touches people at strange times in their lives and in the most unexpected situations. There is never a person who is so far gone—no matter what they've done—that God's grace can't snatch them back to life.

You know what usually gets our attention? The love of God. And then in the midst of our sinfulness it is the overwhelming sense of God's forgiveness—knowing that God never gives up on us, even when we doubt Him. Even in the midst of our failure to follow God.

He never fails us—God's love reaches out and gently gather us close, reminding us once more that He is our true heart's home. It is that steadfast, faithful love and mercy that keeps us going.

It is also the experience of that love and mercy and faithfulness that is the most precious gift we can share. It is the gift each one of us needs to speak and live.

Maybe, just maybe, we can be the love of God to someone who has no idea that such a love even exists. Maybe we have that word of acceptance and forgiveness that will help start them on the journey home.

We have got to try—we have got to try. God wants all of His people back safe and sound. That's what the Father wants.

And sometimes—if the older sons and daughters really take the Father's mercy seriously—then they will know that they must risk going out into life to bring the prodigals home.

That is what the Father wants.

Let us pray:

Holy Lord Jesus, you risked everything in order to bring us home. Your mercy is so great it is beyond our knowing. Help us to live your unconditional love more fully in our own lives so that we reach out to share it with the lost. Help us to be able to set aside judgment in order to be merciful, so that your love always flows through us and into your world.

AMEN

Children, Youth, and Young at Heart Story God Loves Me!

Theme

God's love is unconditional, and His forgiveness is unending.

Object

Lost-and-found box; several lost items (a single shoe, sunglasses, a toothbrush, a Bible, a necklace, etc.)

Scripture

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Have you ever lost something that was very precious to you? I have a lost and found box full of things people have lost. Let's have a look. (Go through the items in the box and talk briefly about what each item might mean to the person who lost it).

Have you ever found something you lost? If so, how did you feel when you found it? (Allow kids to share).

In our Bible lesson today, Jesus told a story about a man who lost something that was very precious to him.

Jesus told the story of a man who had two sons. The younger son asked his father to give him his share of the money that would be his when his father died. The father gave it to him, and the boy left home to go out and see the world and do whatever he wanted. The father was broken-hearted. He had lost one of his sons. It wasn't long before the boy wasted all his money on wild living. He had no money to buy anything to eat, so he got a job feeding pigs. It was a very smelly, gross job. But the boy was so hungry that even the rotten food he fed the pigs looked good to him.

The boy looked around at the mess he'd gotten into and said to himself, "My father's servants live better than this! I will return home and beg for the forgiveness of my father and ask him to take me back as a hired servant." As the boy approached his father's house, his loving father, who had been watching and hoping for his son's return, saw him coming and ran to meet him. He threw his arms around the boy and hugged him and kissed him.

The father was so happy his son had returned that he gave him a robe and placed a ring on his finger. He ordered his servants to prepare a feast. "My son was dead and now he is alive. He was lost, but now he is found," he said.

Jesus told this story to show the kind of love God has for His children. When one of God's children strays away, He always welcomes him with open arms when he

returns home. Aren't you glad that you have a Heavenly Father who loves you, even when you may not deserve it? I am!

Let us pray,

Dear Father, we thank You for Your unconditional love and unending forgiveness. We are thankful that even when we stray away, You welcome us home with open arms. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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