

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Jesus tells a parable about a son who ponders his father's love only after he has spurned it. The grace he receives is beyond his hopes. That same grace is a crisis for an older brother who believed it was his obedience that earned his place in the father's home.

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³So he told them this parable: ^{11b}"There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "

Where do we see first? Where do we place our focus? Do you enjoy pictures like these that actually contain at least two images? Often times in Facebooks feeds people will put all kinds of images and then supposedly what we see first, or what we do not see, says something about us. I'm not always sure about all of that, but there is no question that we often see what we are looking for even if you aren't consciously aware that you are looking. This week ahead, notice how many cars on the road are the color white. Now that I have said that, you will see them even when you are not looking.

The parables of Jesus are often like that. How do we hear them? How do we interpret them? What consciously or unconsciously are looking for in them? There are all kinds of ways which is part of the majesty and brilliance of them. What is going on in our life even impacts them even when we heard them many times before.

I have often wondered which is the most famous parable of all. Is it the Good Samaritan story, that I might give a slight edge to, or today's parable that has often been mislabeled as the prodigal son?

If we been around the church anytime at all, or paid attention to religious language and story, we have no doubt encountered this parable many times. Even the phrase "prodigal son" is used in our culture. So, on this final day of March; what is new in this parable as we hear it today? What stood out for you? What did you hear? What nugget of the Gospel can cross our path and impact our discipleship, impact our living, as we heard again the telling of this masterful story by Jesus?

Probably the most illuminating teaching I have ever heard on this parable came from Professor Mark Powell at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, a professor that we have referenced and used as a resource in our adult

Sunday School class. Powell asks: “When dealing with this parable, where do we place our focus?” Often, we place it on the actions of the prodigal son. If we do so, one can ask the question - why did this son, who took off with his dad’s inheritance end up in such a bad predicament? The answer for many of us is because he squandered all that he had, was irresponsible, and basically partied too hard. This is a very common American response. We have seen this scene played out around us, perhaps at times we have even been that prodigal son. However, when asked the same question in other settings and cultures, the answer was very different. When Dr. Powell asked this question to seminary students in Russia: “Why did the son end up in his situation; most replied with the answer - because a famine occurred in the land where he was living. Now that answer may surprise us, but if we look back at the parable, that is actually true, the text of Jesus’ story says a famine came over the land; without the famine, perhaps the young son makes it and is able to survive and put enough of his resources together to sort of float along. So, the famine is certainly a factor in the cause of his predicament. In another setting, in fact in Africa, Dr. Powell also asked some Christians there: “Why did the son end up in a situation in which he was left with nothing and starving?” The highest percentage answer came back, that the reason he had to go home, was that he was hungry, because no one gave him anything. Again, when we review the parable, this indeed is a fact. Jesus says that the man was starving because no one gave him anything and said he would have “gladly” partaken in the pig rations. And if you think about the Jewish probation against eating pork, one can see the compromise of his life that the younger man was making simply to survive. If someone would’ve given him something to eat, or even allowed him to

eat the pig food, perhaps he would've been able to again float along without having to return to his father.

Where do we place our focus? If one grew up in Russia and experienced a life in which nature unfolded in such a way that crops were lost and there is nothing to eat due to a severe famine, one's antenna becomes laser focused on that situation; just like we may know people who went through the depression in this country decades ago and have different behaviors and perspectives because of it. So, if one is hearing a parable in which a famine mentioned, it is going to grab your attention. Likewise, if you are living in the continent of Africa, in which many countries have experience warlords who steal and control food that has been given to those in need; if you live in a country in which the political system is corrupt that only the powerful getting anything, if you live in a part of the world in which you depend on others to help you; the fact that somebody is not giving you something to help out, also perks your attention in any given story.

Where we place our focus impacts how we view the world. What we hear and see first, makes an impression. In fact, in the parable all three of these reasons are valid and true, this son certainly squandered his father's property and his inheritance, there was a famine, and Jesus says no one gave him anything. In the end however, whichever cause was primary, or the main focus, the bottom line is that the youngest son is left with no other alternative than to return home to a hopeful accepting father.

Meanwhile, in the story it is very easy when others retell this story to end at verse 24, which often some people do. This is the point where the father welcomes the returning son home, kills the fatted calf for him, and says the famous words: "he was lost and is found." Period, end of story –

they all celebrate. But in fact, the story does not end here. There is more. While so many people get focused on the young son's situation and his behavior and predicament, what can often be ignored is the behavior of the older son. And truth be told, that often for many of us in the church, the actions of the older son may even have something stronger say to us, than the story of the returning son. This is where the parable indicts everyone. For the story of the elder son is the story of a person who resents somebody for being welcomed back, resents that a party is thrown for his return, can't believe that a person who left home and came back empty-handed is so easily and even wonderfully welcomed back to the homestead; can't believe that the household resources are "wasted" in this way. Why spend money on the poor, why give someone a second chance? Perhaps, we too, want to say along with the elder brother in the story: "What am I "chopped liver?" Why am I not getting mine? It's not fair.

Thank God for a welcoming father. Thank God for a God and message of grace. Thank God for Jesus Christ who comes as the promised Messiah to bring salvation to everyone in the world regardless of our brokenness. Thank God for the amazing grace that says in the end it is not about behavior, not that the behavior doesn't matter, but in the end, it is about God forgiving us; it is about God reaching out to us; it is about God bringing us home; it is about God accepting us. Jesus's own journey to the cross of death is a reminder of just how far God goes to claim and reclaim us; to promise to us, to grab hold of us, to share with us the abundant, overflowing love and life-giving message of our Creator. May we first focus on what God has done for us, ahead of us, and in spite of us. Amen.