

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday after Trinity
Luke 15:11-32
June 17th, 2018

It's an old story. Two brothers couldn't be any more different. One, by no fault of his own, lived a wealthy life in the house of his father. The other, by every fault of his own, became a skid row bum. They are different and they see these differences within each other. The elder brother, who is very successful, sees his younger brother as a disgrace to the family who has wasted his life on lustful self-indulgence. The younger, on skid row, sees his elder brother as a self-righteous snob who thinks you are only worth something if you have something. At one time they worked together. But their different ideas about life, about adventure, and about freedom resulted in the two of them taking two very different paths. They were so different that they didn't care much for the other. There was a lot of blame going around. There was a lot of resentment as well.

It's an old story that echoes with familiarity within many families today. We all know the resentments we feel over failures we blame on others. We know the disgust we have with others who we believe have failed us or even disgraced us. In the Gospel text for today, we hear an old story told by our Lord Jesus. It's about a family with a self-righteous snob, a skid row bum, and their father who surprises the both of them with his unconditional love. For the purpose of this sermon, I would like to take a page out of the book from a seminary professor of mine, who saw this parable of the Prodigal Son as a five act drama – much like one would see in the world of literature.

Act one describes the younger son yearning for his share of the estate. His will was freedom. His desire was to get away. So, he asked, and received his share of his father's estate. And away he went. A young boy, so inexperienced, so naive, wanted to be free from the restricting rules of his father's house and live a life that was free from such boundaries. Sound familiar?

I remember wanting from my parents more freedom when I was younger. I always wanted to see how far I could stretch the boundaries, how late I could stay up – what I could do or not do. Sometimes "freedoms" can go too far. In the text, the younger son wishes to take his share of the estate and separate himself from his self-righteous brother and his father's rules.

In act two, the prodigal son squanders his wealth in wild living and had to hire himself out to a citizen of the country so that he wouldn't starve to death. He worked for a pig farmer and, as the parable says, he longed to eat the food that the pigs were eating. Part of the irony is – this young boy was Jewish. To work with pigs is a disgrace because pigs are considered unclean animals to the Jew. And even worse...to eat pig food...

No doubt that we have heard this same story countless times. Loose living, money runs out, and troubles come. The parable presents a picture of a man who has reached the lowest level of life short of complete despair. This is an accurate picture of us, the sinner, who has forsaken God by acting apart from Him. And we struggle just to survive. This is not the bum we see begging on the side of the road. This hired hand of a pig farmer is us.

Struggling to survive will always be the case for those who live outside of Christ. No, I'm not saying that we as Christians have a better life right now than anyone else. Many times the opposite is true. However, to live apart from the Father, just as the prodigal son wanted to live apart from his father, will produce grave consequences. The prodigal son went broke without the father. The prodigal son went hungry without the father. We too are broke and hungry if we remain apart from our Father in heaven.

In act three we see the younger son's change of heart. He realizes that his father's hired men are better off than he is at the moment. He says that he will go back to his father and ask not to be like a son, but to be like one of his hired men.

A faithful church member once asked his pastor which word in the English language is the most difficult to say. His pastor suggested a few tongue twisters, but each time the old gentlemen shook his head, no. Finally he answered his own question by spelling out the word w-r-o-n-g.

Have you ever noticed how hard it is for anyone to say: “I am wrong”? In other words of the prodigal son, “I will go back to my father,” we witness a true change of heart. In verse 17 it says that this man “came to his senses” as if to imply that he was insane. And in a matter of speaking we could say that he was insane. He was insane to believe that he could live apart from his father. For us we claim the same insanity when we live apart from God. It’s insane because it’s not possible. We try – all the time we try. But life is not possible apart from God.

The fourth act starts out with the prodigal son making his way back to his father. The text says, “*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 admits that he was wrong. But before he could get one word out, the father was running to his son – throwing his arms around him – having his servants bring a robe, sandals, and killing the fattened calf for the celebration that was to come.

True repentance is “God working first” in the lives of His children. Before we can even utter one word, our heavenly Father is running toward us and rejoicing over the fact that we have returned. Repentance is not our work – Repentance – the Father running out to the son before he can even say, “I’m sorry” is the work of the Father.

Even though the Father does not hesitate to forgive the son, we dare not think that our sins don’t come at a price. They do. It is true, we can say with the son, “*I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*” We don’t deserve our Lord’s grace. The price of our grace and salvation was the blood of our Lord’s only begotten Son. The Lord running to us in forgiveness comes at a price. This “free gift” of forgiveness cost our Lord His very life on the cross. And each time we go our wayward way, we nail that Son of His back to the cross. St. Paul wrote, “*What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace will abound all the more? By no means!*” Sin is not the way to grace. Our sins cost our Father a hefty price.

In the fifth act, fairness becomes the issue. The older brother reflects sediments as he asks his father for an explanation for all that is happening. In this final act we hear the plea of a self-righteous man who cannot believe that his father would kill the fatted calf for such a good-for-nothing skid row bum. He was angry. And he accused his father of being unfair.

I can’t say that I blame him. The older brother makes a very good case for himself by saying, “*Look! All these years I have been slaving away for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.*” Sounds like a pretty good case to me. However, with the older brother’s wisdom, comes his folly. He doesn’t see anything wrong with himself, he just sees what his brother had done. Both are sinful, just in different ways. The younger wanted freedom, the older was self-righteous. Finding no fault in himself, the older brother saw himself as being as perfect as possible. But the father knows better. The older brother, you see, was lost in the father’s own house.

As for us, we complain when things get “unfair.” We like to expose the bad of everyone else and show how good we are. I mean, you are here this morning aren’t you? You must be doing something right. But remember, through our belly-aching and our reason, God remains “unfair.” That’s right, He is “unfair.” And thank God that God is not fair.

If He was fair, we would get what we deserve – no Heavenly Father running out to us and wrapping his arms around us and rejoicing that we have come home. This homecoming in repentance, cost our Heavenly Father the price of His Son our Savior. That’s not fair – for our Father. That’s not fair – and thank God His is not fair.

It’s an old story. Two brothers who won’t talk to each other. One is a skid row bum, the other a self-made success in business. But while these brothers sound so different, they are actually so much alike. They both are loved by God. And for that reason, when one comes back home to his Father’s house, there is much rejoicing. Jesus was given on that cross for both of them.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.