

Fourth Sunday in Lent – 2025

Isaiah 12:1-6

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Jesus seems to have unique insight into the hearts of sinners. Jesus also seems to understand people who don't like sinners. Actually, it's more than just folks who don't like sinners but those who don't like forgiveness, those who don't like grace. I'm pretty sure that this parable has zero to do with people outside the church. The parable of the Prodigal Son is designed for people who say that they love God but who are, at their core, opposed to grace. Can you imagine a church that only has the "right kind of people"? Can you imagine a congregation where one has to present their moral bona fides before they would be accepted as part of the tribe? It would be a pretty bizarre scenario where we confess, "I, a poor miserable sinner..." and then we are horrified to discover that we are actually in the company of poor, miserable sinners.

Sin can be shocking. This parable is not an endorsement of sin. The church is not to be in the business of endorsing sin. That is a bad idea. Live and let live is not in the Bible. Neither is "I'm Okay, You're Okay." This parable is also not meant to say that the church doesn't call people to repentance. The law as a mirror is something that a preacher is supposed to hold before the eyes of all – including himself. And sometimes a pastor is to be more direct with the individual sheep in his flock. Calling people to repentance is an act of love, care for the soul, something that is prescribed by Scripture (Galatians 6:1).

Jesus seems pretty in tune with sinners. By "in tune" I mean that he understands them and is not repulsed by them. That reality created controversy. Good; the controversy was worth having. The Pharisees were the grumblers. "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Table fellowship was how one identified with others. Who you'll eat with told the world how you view others. After hearing the Pharisees grumble, Jesus proceeds to tell three parables – the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son. This parable is exceedingly vivid. A man had two sons. The first son wishes that his father was dead so that he could have his inheritance pronto. It's outrageous. What's more outrageous is that the father agrees to die – the father gives the ingrate his share of the inheritance. On top of that, this dirtbag of a son goes off and squanders the old man's money on wine, women and song, otherwise known as "reckless living." He naturally finds himself in a bad way. Rock bottom, they call it; he's consorting with swine and eating garbage. It's all really vivid. It's icky stuff, pretty real, and pretty vivid.

Remember, Jesus is telling this story to make a point, to make a number of points. There's no point to be made about how sin is okay or glamorous or funny or cute or edgy or defensible. This son wastes his father's resources in extravagant, foolish, reckless living. Totally selfish; he's a reprobate. But Jesus says that "he came to himself" (Luke 15:17). He remembers his father; he remembers his father's house. It's way better there. He became a deal-maker in his mind. "Treat me as one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19). The sinner is coming home. He has a human kind of deal in mind. But this is a different sort of father. This bedraggled son was still "a long way off" and the Father sees him. Compassion and love surge in the old man's heart. The Father is elated! He RUNS and embraces His son, kisses him, welcomes him. The

worldly deal that the son had in mind fades. What comes out of his mouth is straight repentance. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21).

Can you relate to that? Have you cried out to God in heartfelt repentance? Have you soiled yourself with one thing or another, come to grips with the impact your behavior has had on yourself, on others, besmirching your God-given holiness, distancing yourself from your Father and needing restoration? Can you relate to the prodigal son who was wayward and wanted desperately to come home? And then seeing, truly seeing, your Father’s heart and being honest with Him, confessing your sin and not dressing it up or excusing it or pretending that it wasn’t as bad as it really was? Can you relate to the repentant son? I can. The parable reaches a crescendo early. The Father calls for the robe, the ring, the shoes – items of genuine sonship. It is complete restoration – not begrudging. God the Father doesn’t traffic in forgiveness by degrees. There is no such thing as a partially crucified Savior. There is no such thing as a conditional absolution. There is no such thing as a more enthusiastic benediction given to Roberta and a less enthusiastic one given to Charlene because, well, Roberta is a better Christian than Charlene. The Pharisees were aghast. But it got worse for them.

The older brother – holy fright! – the older brother is a toad. There’s a whiff of barbeque in the air and he hears music. Hey, what’s with the music? That’s not right! There’s nothing on the calendar. We only hire the band when there’s a big event. What the heck? No one told me about a party. The older son trudges in from the field wondering what’s the deal and pretty soon he’s going to be flamed out. You’re what? For him? Are you kidding me? He’s angry. He refuses to come to the church service because that sinner brother of mine is there. His disposition about his Father comes out in a rush. “All these many years I have been slaving for you (that’s the Greek word – slaving, δουλεύω), I’ve never disobeyed your command, and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends” (Luke 15:29). Then the older brother recounts his younger brother’s sins. And how does he know his brother’s sins anyway? It’s a vivid story. Don’t get caught up in the vividness of the story. See how God deals with sinners and check your heart – do you begrudge God’s generosity? Do you begrudge God’s love for people who clearly don’t deserve it? Would you be happier with Christianity if people had to earn God’s love, earn God’s forgiveness?

At the seminary, my professors were quick to emphasize that the heart of a Pharisee beats in all of us. Judgmental, spiritually aloof, we are not perfectly accepting of all. It’s not okay. It’s not something we should just get used to. The old man, the old Adam, the old, sinful nature is to be crucified daily. “Who are you to judge another man’s servant?” (Romans 14:4). It’s a rhetorical question designed to keep you out of God’s position of judging whether or not someone is “worthy” of forgiveness. Another one of our Lord’s parables, the one about how the master of the vineyard pays the workers who only worked one hour as much as he paid the ones who worked the full day – that parable has this priceless line: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Matthew 20:15). That’s the heart of a Pharisee – one who begrudges the wonder of God’s grace given to someone who doesn’t deserve it. What a cold heart. What a sad heart. The cold, sad heart doesn’t see our Lord’s sacrifice for what it is.

Jesus is the fattened calf. He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). God so loved the world, in all of its troubles, God loves this world, this humanity. Not an AI created illusion of perfect people, but us. Love gave up His Son. And the Father's love for His Son is extraordinary. Yet the God the Father sent His Son to be crucified, to bear our sin, to suffer the Father's punishment for sin – that sacrifice is behind grace and it is for everyone. The Father rejoices to see any of his wayward children on the horizon and He *runs* to them with His grace. Grace was there when you were baptized. Grace is the food at this table. Grace will be there when you die. Christ crucified is the content of grace. Christ crucified is Divine Love for the wayward, for the devout believer who stays close, for the newborn baby, for the aged widower, for those are trying to escape their shame, for those who quietly are conflicted in their soul over their hidden defiance of God's commands. God's love leads us to repentance. God's love leads us to restoration. That is the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is a glorious message. Your Father loves you so much!