

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**Trinity 3 – June 16, 2024**  
**Luke 15:11-32 – The Prodigal Son**  
**Rev Peter Wagner**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday was the parable of the great banquet. Come to the feast, said the master. Come, for everything is now ready. Come to church. Don't make excuses. Don't despise God's invitation.

Now, today, the parable of the prodigal son follows up and teaches us why we should come to church. Return to the Lord, like the prodigal son returning to his father. Return and be forgiven.

For when the younger son finally came to his senses, when he recognized himself as a poor, wretched sinner, then at last he confessed the truth. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And he was right. He really was not worthy to be called a son. He understood what his older brother still had yet to learn, that neither of them deserved the inheritance. Both of them, they both received it all by grace.

So for his awful sin, the prodigal son comes home expecting wrath. Instead, he finds love and compassion. He hoped his father would take him in as a servant and give him some scraps of food. Instead, he is embraced as a son, and in his honor they slaughter the fattened calf.

O how great the Father's love! What a magnificent example we have today for all of us weak and selfish human fathers. "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Return, sinners, to the loving Father, for his grace exceeds your wildest hope. Return, and be forgiven.

Jesus sinners doth receive. Truly, the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus is the central theme of the whole Bible. Forgiveness is entire purpose of the church, of all our sacraments and all our preaching. The church is a hospital for sinners.

So as you come to this hospital, broken and contrite, expecting wrath for all you've done, take comfort. Treasure the lovely words of our Old Testament reading. In just two verses, Micah 7 mentions God's forgiveness four times. "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."

And consider also the words of the appointed psalm, Psalm 103, "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

But sadly, we hear so much about forgiveness in the church that we actually get bored. We behave like ungrateful sons, taking our inheritance and hitting the road. We fail to confess sincerely, we make little effort to turn from our sinful ways. Thus we dishonor the Giver. We squander God's grace in reckless living, as if we can sin all the more that grace may abound.

No. Repentance is the mark of faith. The more mature a Christian grows, the more acutely aware he becomes of his sin, and the more eagerly he seeks the Father's forgiveness.

For Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. In a hospital, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners, to save them. When the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes criticized the company he kept, "This man receives sinners and eats with them," Jesus rebuked them sharply. He told the parable of the lost sheep, and of the faithful shepherd who left the ninety-nine to find the one gone astray. And when he found it, he brought it home on his shoulders rejoicing. "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

May we never suppose we are righteous. May we always confess our sin and return to our gracious God. For truly, we are sinners. And this is far worse than saying we commit sins. Sin is not some sort of invading virus, something that came into us from outside, something we need God's help to shake off. Sin is internal, it belongs to us, it's there at the core of our nature.

Our sinful nature hates to hear this. We hate the preaching of original sin. We prefer to think that people are basically good. However rough people may seem around the edges, the world tells us, they're really good at heart. Do not be deceived. It's a lie. People are fundamentally evil. We're lovers of wickedness, haters of God. Apart from Christ and his righteousness, all our good deeds are puffed up rubbish in God's sight.

Scripture is clear: every inclination of man's heart is only evil all the time. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In sin did my mother conceive me. "There is none is righteous, no, not one. No one understands; no one seeks God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

And the contrite sinner always confesses his own sin as the worst. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

Apart from Christ, the homosexual is perishing in his sin. So is the addict, and the drunkard, and the couple living together outside of marriage. And so are you, if you do not repent. So examine your heart, and come to church. Come home in repentance. However externally righteous your life, you need the Father's forgiveness as much as the prodigal son.

But even more truly, know that your Father loves to forgive. His church is the house of grace. Your wages of sin should be death, but here the free gift of God in Christ is yours: eternal life.

But forgiveness has its price. In the parable, the loving father suffered grief when his younger son turned away. He suffered derision and embarrassment from the neighbors about his dysfunctional family. And he suffered huge financial loss. But he suffered all these things gladly, all in love, to bring his son at last to repentance.

And your heavenly Father suffered infinitely more for you. He gave up his greatest treasure, his beloved only begotten Son, to buy you back. For your sake, the only-begotten Son was cut off from his Father, to restore you. He departed into the far country where you had strayed, into this evil world, to seek you out and bring you home. And then he gave his life for your redemption, his blood for your forgiveness. The Son of God was dead, that you might live. That is how precious lost sinners are to God.

And oh what great love the father shows, not only to the younger son, but to them both! For in the parable, both sons were sinners. One needed forgiveness for his reckless living. The other needed forgiveness for his prideful contempt. And each one of us is like those two. In fact, we spend our lives going back and forth between the two. At times we sin openly in thought and deed, so God must punish and drive us to repentance. Other times we fall into the far more dangerous sin of thinking we're righteous, as if we deserve our Father's gratitude and love.

But the wonderful thing about the parable is that the father loves them both. He loves the younger son so much that while he's still a long way off, he runs to embrace him and kiss him. All his wickedness is forgotten, not even mentioned, put away forever. There's nothing but love and rejoicing. For this his son was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost, and is found.

As for the older son, the one who thinks he's righteous, the Father loves him just as much. He goes out and pleads with him: Come in to the feast, do not harden your heart. All that I have is yours. Your brother is alive, so rejoice with me in his salvation. Do not be envious.

Humble yourself, says your Father. If you have gone astray, return. Or, if you suppose yourself righteous, confess and do not harden your heart. Whoever you are, come by faith. Bask in my love, says the Father. Kneel together, side by side, with all your brothers and sisters in Christ, your fellow sinners. Enter my feast together in communion. Drink the cup of my love, the blood of my son, shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins. Take refuge in my love and mercy. For you were lost, but my own beloved Son, your good shepherd, he has found you. He's gently lifted you on his shoulders, and now in the church he carries you home rejoicing. Amen.

Now may the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory, may he himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.