

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 27, 2022 (4th Sunday in Lent, Year C)
Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see.” GRACE TRULY IS AMAZING. There is no GREATER gift.

Besides the cross itself, we see it NO MORE CLEARLY than in this story Jesus tells about a father who had two sons. I remember a gathering of Lutheran pastors down in the Cities. The participants were asked to name the ONE story they thought described BEST who God WAS, what God was LIKE. Overwhelmingly, THIS story was it.

The father’s grace is AMAZING to us, because this younger son of his DIDN’T DESERVE it, AT ALL. To go to your father and ask for your inheritance BEFORE he died? There was NO GREATER insult than THAT. There still ISN’T. It’s UNTHINKABLE. It was like saying, “DROP DEAD. You’re ALREADY DEAD to ME, so give me my part now.” Than to TAKE that inheritance and SQUANDER it was a DOUBLE insult to his father.

The father should EXPLODE with RAGE at such an INAPPROPRIATE request. But he DOESN’T explode. He GRANTS a request that was COMPLETELY UNIMAGINABLE in his time. And so, we see right away that THIS is a very UNUSUAL father.

This story has traditionally been called the “prodigal son,” and that’s a GOOD description for him. The word “prodigal” MEANS “reckless and wasteful,” and that’s EXACTLY what he was. He RECKLESSLY WASTED his fortune. He spent his FATHER’S money like it was going out of style, living only for the MOMENT and for HIMSELF.

Brady Whitehead, chaplain of Lambuth College in Tennessee, tells about STUDENT at his school, whose parents were tragically killed in an accident. This student was the beneficiary of the estate and suddenly became VERY rich. He started SQUANDERING the money on lavish trips. He would even invite OTHER students to go ALONG, at HIS expense. He was spending the money so fast that Whitehead called him into his office one day and had a talk with him. He said that as Chaplain of the school he felt it was his RESPONSIBILITY to QUESTION his spending habits. The student FLIPPANTLY responded: “But you don’t understand just how MUCH money I’ve inherited.” “That may be so,” said Whitehead, “but even a LARGE estate comes to an END.” Well, the student didn’t listen, and by the time he GRADUATED from Lambuth, ALL of his parent’s money was already GONE.

Whether it’s money or just the intoxication of freedom, it DOESN’T last. It NEVER does. It comes to an end. And THEN what?

We return to the story and we find the son with NOTHING. He’s WORKING for a GENTILE, tending PIGS! Now, remember, he’s JEWISH. Pigs were considered unclean. And WORKING with pigs, GENTILE PIGS – that made HIM unclean. It doesn’t get any WORSE than that. It was the LOWEST of the low. He was ASHAMED of himself.

And then he hit rock bottom. He was STARVING. He wished he WAS a pig! At least the PIGS had something to EAT. But nobody gave him even THAT.

And when you HIT rock bottom, THAT’S when you remember the Father. The son finally came to his senses, and set off and WENT to his father.

But while he was STILL far off,” it says, “his father SAW him.” Now, I find that STRIKING. JUST as he came over the horizon, his father SAW him before ANYONE else did. Why does a WEALTHY man, a BUSY man have his eyes on the ROAD? Because he’d been WAITING for his son ALL that time, WAITING for him to come home. At a distance, no one could have known for SURE who it was, but a PARENT KNOWS.

And even though it was COMPLETELY UNDIGNIFIED for a man of his age and stature, he RAN to his son, he ran the WHOLE way. In spite of all the son had DONE, in spite of all the INSULTS to his father, his father NEVER STOPPED loving him.

Now here's ANOTHER amazing thing – the son had REHEARSED this whole speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." He's REALLY only asking for something to EAT. He thinks he doesn't DESERVE anything more, and he DOESN'T. But before he could FINISH his speech, BEFORE he gets to ASKING to become a hired hand, his father STOPS him. The son says, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son," and his father STOPS him THERE. "You ARE my son; you've ALWAYS been my son." And he puts his ARMS around him, and KISSES him, and FORGIVES him.

He didn't NEED any maudlin show of penance, or even an APOLOGY; it didn't matter HOW he came back, only that he DID. He was just HAPPY to have him HOME again. That's the EXTRAVAGANT, UNBELIEVABLE LOVE of our heavenly Father. AMAZING. GRACE is AMAZING.

And the Father shouts "Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was DEAD and is ALIVE again; he was LOST and is FOUND!" And they began to celebrate. And we STILL ARE. That's why we're HERE today – because heaven RESOUNDS over ONE lost sinner who is found.

But ... that's not then END of the story.

The famous preacher Fred Craddock PREACHED on this text one Sunday. After the service a man said to him, "I really didn't CARE much for that, frankly."

Craddock said, "Why?"

He said, "Well, I guess it's not your sermon. I just don't like that story."

Craddock said, "What is it you don't like about it?"

He said, "It's not morally responsible."

Craddock said, "What do you mean by that?"

"Forgiving that boy," he said.

Craddock said, "Well, what would YOU have done?"

He said, "I think when he came home he should've been ARRESTED."

Craddock wrote this: "This fellow was SERIOUS...I thought he was going to tell me a JOKE. But he was REALLY SERIOUS. He belonged to this unofficial organization nationwide, never has any meetings and doesn't have a name, but it's a very strong NETWORK that I call "quality control people." They're the MORAL POLICE. MANDATORY sentences and no PAROLE, mind you, and EXECUTIONS."

Which BRINGS us to the OLDER brother. You see, there are really TWO prodigal sons in this story. The sin of the YOUNGER son is PLAIN for ALL to see. But then there's ALSO the sin of the OLDER brother. HIS sins are more subtle, but NO LESS REAL. His is the sin of RESENTMENT.

He prefers JUSTICE OVER MERCY. He thinks he DESERVES God's FAVOR by staying at home, and living a GOOD life. How DARE his father receive and accept his SINFUL brother who's returned home?

HE insults his father too. His father throws a party and the eldest son DOESN'T attend? OUTRAGEOUS. And he says, "For all these years I have been working like a SLAVE for you." REALLY, a SLAVE? What kind of relationship is THAT? He INSULTS his father JUST as badly as his BROTHER did. This OLDER brother is a PRODIGAL son too – he RECKLESSLY WASTES his relationship with his father.

The father should EXPLODE in RAGE at such behavior. But he DOESN'T explode. AGAIN, this is no ORDINARY father. And AGAIN, even though it was COMPLETELY UNDIGNIFIED for a father, he LEAVES his OWN PARTY and goes OUT to his older son and invites HIM inside too, "PLEADS with him," it says, to join HIS celebration.

You see, the father loved BOTH of his children, went OUT to BOTH of his children, and was GENEROUS to BOTH of his children. Actually, the parable is misnamed. It's not really ABOUT the

PARTYING of the Prodigal, or the BITTERNESS of the older brother; the story is about the FATHER, the GOODNESS of the FATHER, the FAITHFULNESS of GOD.

The message here is that God LOVES us DEEPLY, and that He wants BOTH of His sons (ALL of His children) to come and be a part of HIS celebration. The parable demonstrates the DEPTH of God's love. There's nothing you could do that will make God love you any less. God looks BEYOND our sins AND our self-centeredness, and sees us for what we TRULY are – his CHILDREN, his daughters and sons, and we are INFINITELY loved.

A story about a father with TWO children. Whether you were the LOST one, or the GOOD one, God's calling you to CELEBRATE with him, to JOIN the PARTY. No matter how FAR you stray, whether to the FAR COUNTRY or outside the DOOR GRUMBLING, he's CALLING you. He says, "Let us eat and CELEBRATE; for this son of mine was DEAD and is ALIVE again; he was LOST and IS FOUND!"

He's calling for YOU – He's calling you HOME. AMAZING. GRACE REALLY IS AMAZING.
Amen.