

St. Luke's Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 21 – October 10th and October 13th, 2013

Luke 15:11-32

³Then Jesus told them this parable:

¹¹Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

“But 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.

²¹“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Dear forgiven children of God,

Let’s dream for a minute! If you could be anyone, who would you want to be – real or even someone who is not real but is played on the big screen or on TV? Would you want to be a famous celebrity or movie star? Would you want to be a famous athlete or TV character? I’m sure that some of you would pick a famous athlete and say I would like to be able to do all the things that LeBron James does or Aaron Rodgers can do. Others might say that it would be pretty cool to be rich and famous with people all around you and living in luxury everyday like Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. Others of you might pick someone who isn’t famous or rich, but it might be someone you admire -- like a teacher or other important person from your everyday life. I always thought it would be pretty cool to be someone like Donald Driver from the Green Bay Packers or Robin Yount from the Milwaukee Brewers. These men were great players, while at the same

time they were people who were humble and respected by just about everyone.

How many of you would pick bad people? Who would say that I would like to be like a terrorist who is looking to blow up innocent people? Who would say that I would like to be Bernie Madoff and be found guilty of cheating people out of millions of their hard-earned money? Who of us would say that we want to be like Jeffery Dahmer or any other serial murderer? I think that I am safe to say that we would be looking to be someone who was good rather than a person who was bad and hated.

As we look at this portion of God's Word for us today, we are going to look at three different people. As we look at these characters, I want each of you to take a close look at each of them and decide which one you could see yourself being. The first person is the youngest son who squandered his father's inheritance. The second character is the oldest son who was angry at all of the love his father showed to the lost son when he returned. And the last character is the father who showed so much love to his returning son. I want you to think about each of these three characters and think which one best displays and represents you. Are you more like the lost younger son or the oldest son, or are you more like the father or maybe you are a combination of all three? And as you think that it through, why would you come to that conclusion?

This little exercise might make us feel a little uncomfortable and that is actually a good thing. As we work through these things, we are also going to realize that God has given us this portion of his Word for a very good reason. We are going to see that whether we want to admit it or not, we are playing the roles of these people recorded in God's Word and even have become experts in some of these roles and not so good at others. But the greatest thing we are going to see is that we are connected to all three. That is why our theme will bring out that that picture:

Theme: We Are Full . . .

- 1. of sin**
- 2. of selfishness**
- 3. of forgiveness**

As God gives us this portion of God's Word, he was reminding the Pharisees and all of us that God came for those who we might call "sinners." A sinner in this context is someone who realizes his or her sinfulness and is willing to confess that to our God and seek his forgiveness. This is the power of God's Law and Gospel in all of its power and splendor

Let's start with the first son, **Then Jesus told them this parable: Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father."** In simple terms this younger son wanted his inheritance early, and he was going to go and live life to the fullest. He lived life so full that he wasted all of his money and was left with nothing. He had gone from having everything to having nothing. He even longed to eat what the pigs ate and to be treated like a servant. He had hit rock bottom.

What does this really mean? How do we hit rock bottom spiritually? Have you ever hit rock bottom or are you hitting rock bottom right now? It is easy to say we have reached a spiritual rock bottom and we think that things can't get any worse, but is that really rock bottom. Maybe to understand this parable better we need to get a little dirty. We will use the picture that Jesus used. The younger son was muddy and dirty in a spiritual sense. He was playing in the pigpen. Spiritually speaking his heart was a pigpen. It was filthy and unclean. His heart was rotten to the core.

If we take a close look at ourselves we see that we're covered with mud. When we use vulgar language with the best of them, we are covered in spiritual mud. When we treat our parents or teachers disrespectfully, we are full of mud. When we think that all this stuff Pastor Gartner is talking about doesn't really apply to us, we are really covered in mud. When we think that it is OK to gossip or spread rumors, we are covered in mud. When we waste and squander the blessings that God gives to us, we are covered in mud. When we fail to forgive each and every time someone confesses their sin to us, we are covered in mud. When we are not kind and considerate to our spouses or children, we are covered in mud. The list goes on and on and on. This is one big mud pit that we are in, isn't it? That is why each and every one of us gathered here today needs to realize that we are exactly like the younger son. If we think that this is talking about everybody else and not me, we are going in the wrong direction.

2. of selfishness

What about the oldest son, he must be better than the younger son, **“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ‘The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”** While the younger son wasted and lost everything, we see the opposite from the oldest son. Being the devout and hardworking son, he stuck around by his father's side and faithfully performed all the tasks that his father wanted. What a model child! But upon further review we see that this son has different problems. He thought that the father was being unfair. How could he give so much love to the younger brother who had done all of these rotten things? How come his father hadn't rewarded him for being so faithful?

As we sit here today, we might see a lot of ourselves in this son. We are faithful in coming to church. We are faithful in bringing generous offering to church. We are faithful in volunteering our time to serve God and others. We are faithful in following God's commands. With that in mind, we might say, but why aren't more of our members at St. Luke's, like me? Why don't people come to church more faithfully and more regularly, like me? Why don't people bring faithful and generous offerings, like me? Why do so many people break God's commands and do what they want rather than be faithful to their God, like me? While the younger son might have been covered in mud and it was easy to see, the older son was also covered in mud, but he thought that he was clean, and that is a big spiritual problem. As we sit in this house, it is so easy to think that we are the clean ones and if only the dirty ones would get their act together things would be much better. But what a horrible lie the devil has placed before us if we think this. We are just like the Pharisees then, and think that God owes us something, when in fact we need to be more like the younger son who realized his shortcomings and humbly returned to his father.

3. of forgiveness

And finally to this last person, the father, **“But 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 said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ‘But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast**

and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. . . ’ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” There are some who might say that the father was way too soft on his son. How could he take his younger son back into the family without some form of punishment or reprimand? That is what our human logic might say. But we need to be careful to realize that as we talk about the father, we realize that this is the picture of God himself as he welcomes repentant sinners into his flock. God is such a wonderful model of what full and complete grace is all about. God forgives with no strings attached. He doesn't make us jump through hoops and do a certain amount of things to earn his grace. He pours out all of his grace upon us completely and fully.

The greatest part about this parable, which is one of my favorite parables, is the picture of forgiveness that God presents to us. It doesn't make any sense to the people of this world. It is too simple. What do we have to do to get this grace and forgiveness? Obviously the younger son did nothing to earn it. He did the exact opposite. He did everything in his power to go against his father and still his father threw him the greatest feast of grace that our sinful hearts could ever have. This is the great feast that God throws for us who are way too much like both the younger and older son. We are thoroughly muddy and thoroughly arrogant at the same time. We are lost, but now found.

There is also the great reminder that God gives us to forgive as God the Father has forgiven us. We say in the Lord's Prayer each week, Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. While it would seem impossible for us as sinners to forgive like God has forgiven us, we realize that God has given us the wonderful example and command to go out into the world and forgive each other. And as Pastor Schultz reminded us last week in his sermon, if we are sinned against every hour of every day, and that person asks for forgiveness, we forgive as God forgives with "no strings attached" every hour of the day. What a joy God has given to us to forgive us and take us into his family even though we don't deserve it and to extend that same wonderful forgiveness to our children, our spouses or family members, our coworkers and everyone that we meet.

So we have seen a close up of three different people today. The two sons, the younger and older, and the father. Who are you most like. With shame in our hearts and guilt from God's Law crushing down on us, I pray we are humbling recognizing that we are really like twins to the two sons. While we aren't very much like the perfect father, because we aren't perfect in our lives like God. Yet, we see some of the forgiving love of the father in our lives as our hearts are filled with his forgiveness and we announce that forgiveness to those in our lives. Thank you heavenly Father for taking me into your family, with all my stains and spiritual dirt. Amen.