

4 Lent Year C March 30 2025

The reason to celebrate.

Luke 15:1-3;11b-32

This story is so familiar that it has its own title from a word that isn't found in the story itself. **It is called the Prodigal Son.** This story has been told in so many ways with a positive take that has taken the word prodigal, which means a person who spends money in a reckless and extravagant way and makes this man into a hero. **Why?**

Before Jesus tells this famous story the Pharisees and the scribes were complaining about Jesus and how he welcomes and eats with sinners. **Jesus was clearly unbecoming of a rabbi or respectful religious leader of his time.** Or was he?

The story that Jesus told was rich with meaning. At first it presents itself as a simple tale about how a person made a bad choice, and decides to return home, in which a party is thrown in honor of his return. **However, there is more taking place than the first glance.**

There are two sons. **The younger of two had a rude and painful conversation with his father.** He requested that he receives his family inheritance immediately. **This clearly implies that as far as the son is concerned, his father is dead to him.** What parent would be as gracious to their own children like this father is beyond comprehension. **Yet, the father honors the request, and the younger son leaves with his newfound fortune.** Given that this wealth came quickly, it departed just as fast. **The younger son wasted his good fortune on immoral living.** It reads like his spending habits reflected his internal moral compass.

Then life got bad for this man. In the distant country in which he made his home there was a severe famine, his money was gone, and the only job he could find was feeding pigs. **For any self-respecting Jew being associated with swine is a sign of a curse.** It was bad for this man. **The pigs, the symbol of ugliness of the world, were eating better than him!** It was at that point, I think, that the young man found his courage. **He realized that in his father's organization, there was enough respect for human beings, and that he would have a higher standing than swine.** For this young man to return to the place of great emotional pain and shame was a matter of life or death. **The shame of what he did to his father wasn't strong enough to keep him in his current situation.**

He knew he had to return to the same person whom he had disgraced and regarded as dead to beg for his own life.

When the religious leaders asked this question of Jesus, "Why are you associating with sinners?" They were protecting themselves from being tainted by other's poor choices and bad behavior. When relationships are built on notions of purity, there isn't much room for life or healing. When the focus becomes prevention oriented, they are more likely to become conflicted. Although these fought relationships are stable and therefore people assign their value to having them, these associations become stale or contentious. Slowly life leaves those relationships, and all is left is death.

Look around today. At a local and national level there are clear divisions around what our public leaders should be addressing. We are finding ourselves in a famine of goodwill toward fellow citizens and we are paying a price for being right and pure. We find ourselves stuck and unable to acknowledge that someone else may have a better idea. But we have spent so much time and energy defending ourselves that we have caused harm toward others. The wisdom of the ages tells us that divided we will fall, but how do we get together after so much ugliness has been expressed?

This story from Luke communicates the power of ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS.

However, had we ever considered what it would take to FORGIVE someone who causes us emotional, physical, and spiritual harm when they have asked forgiveness from us?

It is easier to keep people at a distance rather than make the hard effort to reconcile. When someone asks us to be forgiven, it is a vulnerable moment, FOR EVERYONE. All parties are exposed, and nobody can protect themselves from any future disappointments or a sense of betrayal. To accept a real apology takes courage. It means letting go of the past grievance and all the self-intitiled attitudes that go along with being the injured party. Once we forgive a person, one cannot claim a moral superior position, everyone is now an equal in the relationship. Forgiving someone also means giving up control and accepting the new situation. And it is healing at the core. It is where the soul becomes free, but it does take a risk, will the amend carry on? Has the other party really going to change or will they revert to type and cause harm again? That is the risk that must be taken.

Former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry offers this thought about today's Gospel reading:

(quote) it is clear that the parable is more about the determined, compassionate, infinite providence of God than the ways of God's prodigal children. In the end, this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God, deeper, wider, and higher than our imaginings.

In God Has a Dream, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes:

I have a dream, God says. **Please help Me (God) to realize it.**

It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace.

Where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing.

I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that

My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family.

(end of quote)

Jesus is asking you and I to help God's dream come true. We are entrusted with a sacred and noble task; we are asked to be forgiven AND to FORGIVE.

We are given an example of how forgiving and being forgiven can work. Although today's Gospel lesson is a parable, but it carries a powerful punch when it comes to the power to transform lives and to usher in God's dream into a reality.

This father did not act according to his social Jewish customs. He ran to his son. Now, no self-respecting father would ever run toward a family member that had caused so much disgrace and shame to the family. The young man had a speech prepared which his excited father completely ignored. The overjoyed father throws a party which confuses everyone, including the elder son.

We have a father who breaks all social expectations for a larger purpose. He seeks to reunite what has been broken; to bring together what has been divided. He does so in the unwavering spirit of love and hope. He pays the price willingly. He is so generous with his love that in some ways he could also be given the title of being a prodigal - **wastefully extravagant, lavish, or abundant.** What is being given away in extravagant, lavish or abundantly it isn't money or wealth, it is love.

The elder son was not being unreasonable when he expressed his displeasure toward his father's behavior. What was happening was not right. He never asked for anything, conducted his affairs with dignity and asked for nothing in return.

Why the party for a person who threw away a family blessing!?

His anger was righteous. He rightfully asks why a person who caused so much harm to the family; squandered such wealth on unworthy activities be treated with such respect and honor? Isn't this party an endorsement of poor choices and bad behavior? What good could ever come from this?

He pointed out that he did the right thing and acted in a proper and noble way. He worked hard to protect the family and didn't ask for anything in return.

How is this party justice? How is this even right?

The father pointed out that how his older son conducted his life was honorable and noble. The elder son was a good example of what it means to attend to one's personal responsibility and take care of the family.

However, it is equally important to celebrate when a person who did wrong and brought shame to themselves, **is humble enough to asking for forgiveness.** For healing to be complete there needs to be **intentional recognition and celebration for such a brave act.**

God, and in this parable, the father, saw it fit to celebrate with the return of his wasteful and now humbled son. The same son who shamed and publicly humiliated his father asked for forgiveness from those whom he harmed the most and received love in return; **can we not do the same?**

During the season of Lent, here at St Mark's I say offer this invitation before people come forward to receive the precious bread and wine.

This is the table, not of the Church, but of the Lord's.

It is made ready for those who love Him and for those who want to love Him more.

Come, all those who have much faith, and those who have little,

those who have been here often and

those who have not been here long.

Those who have tried to follow Christ and those who have failed.

Come, because it is the Lord who invites us.

It is God's will that those who desire Him should meet Christ here.

This morning is a party for both sinners and the righteous. A celebration that everyone, the disenchanted and hopeful can join in God's festivity in perfect harmony.

This is how we bring faith to life.