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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

March 6, 2016

Text: Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Sometimes you just need to tell a good story to get your point across. You try everything possible to get your point across – logic, direct discourse, compare and contrast – and they still just don't seem to understand. Stories have a way to explain and illuminate that oftentimes transcends sound, logical human reason. It seems Jesus has come to that point the Pharisees and scribes.

They continue to grumble about the fact that Jesus is eating with and receiving sinners, tax collectors, and all the rejects of society. Although these religious leaders knew their OT Bibles backwards and forwards, they just don't seem to comprehend that God loves sinners and wants to save them from an eternity of judgment and regret. These Pharisees and scribes have lost the joy of salvation and the deep-seated longing for God. Had they forgotten about Isaiah 12:3, 6: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation... Shout and sing for you, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Luke 15 is the one of the best chapters in the Bible that describes and illuminates God's desire to save sinners. Take that statement I just made “God desires to save sinners.” We'd all shake our heads and say Amen, that's the truth the pastor. But the parables of Luke 15 put flesh into that true but rather prosaic statement. There are 3 parables, 3 stories. The first is about a shepherd who leaves his safe and secure 99 sheep in order to find that one lost sheep. And when that sheep is found, he calls his friends and neighbors together to celebrate with food and drink. The lost sheep is found; it's time to rejoice and give thanks.

The second parable is about a woman who has 10 coins but losses one somewhere in the house. She searches high and low to find that one coin. Every nook and cranny is swept. And when she finally finds it, she calls over her friends to rejoice with her. It's time to celebrate.

Both of those parables say that heaven and heaven's angels rejoice over one sinner who repents.

But the greatest story is saved for last. The parable of the Prodigal Son, arguably the greatest parable ever told. This parable is one extended commentary on God's desire to save the lost and bring them back into the joy and grace of His eternal kingdom.

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and all His holy angels rejoice over the sinner who repents and returns to the Lord in faith. We heard about repentance last week. And here it is again. Repentance is that important! Quite simply, to repent means to change your mind so that you see yourself as God sees you. And then rejoice in that knowledge; find joy in that renewed relationship. Let's look at this great parable and discover the heart of God.

A father had two sons. The younger one wanted his share of his father's inheritance. So the son asks the father to give it...before the father is actually dead! Such a request is unthinkable!! Dad, let's skip all the details of you dying, the funeral plans, the weeks of mourning, and then the endless hassle of dividing the inheritance with my older brother. Just give it to me now. It makes no difference to me whether or not you're actually dead.

Amazingly, the father grants the son's request knowing full well what would happen. The younger son takes his newfound fortune on an adventure into a far-away country. And like many young independent men with too much money and no responsibility, he wasted all of it with "reckless living" (vs. 13).

And it just so happens that after the money runs dry a famine hits. Bad timing to be sure! He's got to find work but nothing's available except slopping pigs. The hunger he feels becomes so intense that he's even willing to eat the slop (vs. 16)! For a Jewish boy to live among pigs and to be willing to eat their food is about as rock-bottom as you can get.

At some point, he remembers his father. Or as the parable puts it, "But when he came to himself..." (vs. 17). "What was I thinking in leaving my father? It's time to go home." Repentance is beginning to do its marvelous work.

On the way back, the son prepares a speech. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (vs. 18-19). All very true.

The prodigal also devises a back-up plan. I'll ask my father to "treat me as one of your hired servants" (vs. 19). Even now, he still doesn't really know and understand how radical the father's love for him is, but he will soon.

The son travels until the familiar sights of his father's home come into view. And then what does he see? Someone is running towards him. It can't be but it is! It's the father. Try to imagine what the son's thinking. His father, the same guy he wanted dead, is running toward him. That's unthinkable in those days, older men of dignity and substance running. Why is running to me? To chew me out? To set the dogs on me and run me out of town? This can't be good.

He arrives. Before the son can speak a single word, the father "embraced him and kissed him" (vs. 20). That's a shock! Where's the lecture? Where's the "I told you so, you good for nothing, ungrateful, stupid boy. How dare you come back here like this..." Well, there's none of that.

Love, grace, and acceptance are saturating every syllable of the story. The son finally speaks (vs. 21), "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But then the father interrupts the boy's rehearsed speech. The father doesn't allow the son to make any bargains or propose any condition. "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (vs. 22–24).

Dear saints of God, that's Christianity! God rejoicing over a repentant sinner. The past is forgiven. The future is secured. The dead are made alive! Did you notice the death and resurrection language? My boy was dead – because of his sin – but now's he's alive through repentance and My forgiving love. The Father – God the Father – embraces his fallen children and loves them unto eternal life. That's the kind of love the Father has! He desires, to the depths of His divine being, to save you. It's personal with Him. And He's passionate about saving His children.

But we've almost forgotten one of the father's sons, the elder son. He hears the sounds of the party and calls for a servant to find out what's happening. "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound" (vs. 27). What? That father of mine is eating and rejoicing with a sinner! Sound familiar? Just like Jesus.

Once again the father comes out to a lost son, this time to the older son who's just as lost as the younger son had been. "Come, celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (vs. 32).

But the older son won't rejoice with his father and brother. The obedient son has lost the ability to rejoice and celebrate. His legalism has robbed him of his joy. Duty, responsibility, but no love, only self-absorbed self-righteousness. "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends" (vs. 29). Did you notice that the father wasn't invited! He's just as dead to his father as the younger brother was.

A man had two sons. Both were sinners and in rebellion against their father. Both receive the father's love. Both need a change of heart and mind. Both need repentance.

One son repented. He confessed his sin against God and his father, and received his father's undeserved kindness. And the other? Well, Jesus deliberately leaves the parable open-ended. Will the older son repent and enter into the party and eat and rejoice with the host of heaven repentant sinners? Will we? Can we still rejoice in repentance? Our own or that of another?

When we base our relationship with God on our good works, our obedience, we will inevitably become like the older brother: bitter, resentful, legalistic and judgmental. That's not Christianity! And tragically, the joy of heaven is lost.

Saints of God, embrace the on-going life of repentance. Repentance is the ticket to God's celebration. Receive the radical embrace of our heavenly Father afforded you through His Jesus. I once was dead. But now I'm alive in the Father's love. And don't forget the joy and celebrations. Heaven rejoices when there's repentance and faith in people just like you and me. You're invited to join in. Let the rejoicing continue.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.