

Luke 15:1-3,11-32. Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The 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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He 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! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰ So 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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For 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. ²⁶ So 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. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But 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. ³² 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.’”

The Lord rejoices to find that which was lost

- 1. Let us rejoice with God when a brother or sister is restored**
- 2. Let us rejoice that God has mercy on us**

It is a story of divine love. It is a picture of heavenly joy. It must be. No earthly father could forgive so perfectly. No earthly father could forgive so completely. No earthly father could express such immediate joy. No earthly parent could deal so patiently and so lovingly not just with one son but with two. This can only be a description of God’s amazing grace.

This can only be a description of the joy that he has when a sinner repents, when a dear child of God who was lost in sin returns to him. The Lord rejoices to find that which was lost.

Luke 15 has been called the “lost” chapter of the Bible. It has been called the heart of the third Gospel. This chapter also introduces a larger unit running through Luke 19:27, that presents a series of stories about outcasts. In Luke 19:10, Jesus himself summarizes his care and concern for the lost, the sinner, for the outcast, when he says, **“The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”**

And so the social outcasts, those wandering and lost in immoral and empty lives naturally gathered around Jesus. The self-righteous Pharisees couldn’t stand it. They viewed the tax collectors and other “sinners” as so immoral that they were beyond help. Most teachers or rabbis in their day would not think of welcoming such a following and therefore the Pharisees spoke in a condescending manner about the company Jesus was keeping. Jesus responded by telling a series of parables to teach them that he had come to seek and to save that which was lost - and no one was too immoral, too lost.

Jesus tells the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost or prodigal son in which he describes the joy that God has when a sinner repents. When the shepherd finds his lost sheep he joyfully puts it on his shoulders goes home and calls his friends and neighbors together so that they may celebrate. When the poor woman finds her lost coin she too calls her friends and neighbors to say, **“Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin.”** Both of these actions are a bit out of the ordinary. Normally a person would not go to such extent to find one sheep or one coin when there are 99 more. And to find such a small treasure and then call for friends and neighbors together to rejoice in such a small victory may also seem a bit excessive. I doubt that you have ever called your friends and neighbors over for a party because you found some loose change in the sofa. But this is the joy that God when one sinner returns to him. Jesus assures us this is the joy that the angels in heaven and God himself has when just one sinner repents, “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents “ (Luke 15:10). The parable of the lost coin and the lost sheep both end with this same kind of blessed assurance. If we are not moved already by the love and concern of our Father in heaven Jesus then tells the parable that is often viewed as the greatest of his parables. He tells the parable of the lost son. What amazing grace, mercy, and love!

God has a longing to receive the sinner. He has a desire to welcome back the lost. He cannot stand to see the sinner languish in sin. In our Old Testament lesson he rebukes his people for not listening to his call to repent, but when they do repent he relents and has mercy on his people because, “he could bear Israel’s misery no longer” (Judges 10:16b). God has a longing to receive the penitent sinner. He finds great joy, he is ecstatic when just one sinner repents and he wants others to join him in this joy.

Do we have that same desire? Do we express the same joy and warm reception? The Word of the Lord calls out to the believer lost and wandering in sin to “come near to God and God will come near to you” (James 4:8a). Do we as individuals, or as a congregation, help the straying brother or sister in the faith return or do we make that task more difficult?

When a neighbor ruins his life, squanders his possessions, and drives his life into the ditch, do we pray for him or help him, or is our first instinct to say, “Why should I help him he got what he deserved?” When a member of this family of believers commits a public sin, commits a crime, breaks a marriage, gets divorced, ruins his or her life with drugs or alcohol

or some other addiction, when a member of this family of believers ruins his or her life with a series of poor choices but then that person repents and finds forgiveness in Christ; is there not a part of us that turns up our nose and says, “Well, that doesn’t seem right?” When a brother or sister in the faith returns to worship after a long time away is there not a part of us that says, “Well, it’s about time?” It’s there inside of us, this kind of thinking, this kind of talk, but it shouldn’t be.

In this powerful parable of forgiveness we notice how the older brother does not enter the house. When he hears the news of his brother’s return he does not find joy in the father’s forgiveness, but instead he questions and criticizes the love of the father. He hears the music of the party but instead of rejoicing and joining the celebration, he stands outside fuming.

The father in his great love takes action again. This time he seeks out his older son and he pleads with him to come inside, but the older brother refuses to welcome his brother back. He is even unable to call him his brother; instead when speaking to the father he refers to his younger brother as *“this son of yours”*.

There is a bit of that older brother in all of us isn’t there? There is a part of us that is skeptical of how quickly God can forgive. Isn’t there a self-righteous part of us that is actually offended at how gracious God is? “How can he take him back so quickly, after all that he did?” “Doesn’t she have to earn her reputation and status back?” “I can’t look at him or her without thinking about that sin. I can’t look at him or her and consider him a brother or sister in the faith.” “I just can’t do it!”

It’s there in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions, but it shouldn’t be. When God forgives, he forgives completely. He forgives immediately. He forgives for all time. He welcomes that dear child back and immediately restores his or her status as a child of God. When that son came back, the father runs out to meet him. He welcomes him with open arms. He embraces him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. When the son gives his confession, he is not even able to finish, the father interrupts and calls for the finest robe. He puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Immediately the son is restored. Immediately he again has those blessings that were wasted by his sinful choices.

Those signs of his father’s love are bestowed upon him and serve as a sign to those around that he is fully restored. A fine robe shows that he is not a servant or slave but his status has been fully restored. The ring put on his finger tell everyone that he is his father’s son and a representative of his father’s business. The father restores it all with great joy. This all happens immediately. This is love that goes beyond the love of any earthly father. This is the undeserved love of God, love so amazing, so divine. This is the amazing thing we call grace.

My dear brothers and sisters in the faith when a sinner repents, it is a time for rejoicing. It is not a time for skeptical judgment and cautious probation. It is not time to turn up our noses in self-righteous flair, or cold reluctance. When a sinner repents, when a child of God confesses their sin and in faith returns to his or her family it is a time for celebration. All sin is dangerous, when a sinner is wandering there is a need for a call to repentance, there is in need for repentance. But when a sinner repents we rejoice because God has rescued this dear child from the clutches of sin and hell and has brought him or her back to the family of God. When a sinner repents it is a time of rejoicing and celebration. It

is a time to welcome repentant sinners as God welcomes them - immediately and completely.

When we struggle with this, when we dig up the past, when we are tempted to view ourselves as better than others may God quickly touch our hearts with the power of the gospel. May he give us a loving attitude that receives back the straying! May he give us a warm disposition that is able to overcome our self-righteous tendencies and welcome the repentant with open arms and restore them back fully as part of this family, as dear brothers and sisters in the faith! May he give us joy in finding what was lost!

After all, what right do we have to criticize how freely God gives his love? Who are we to complain that God is not fair? For if God were fair in the way that he deals with our sins he would punish us all for our daily disobedience. He would punish those who clearly squander their lives in wild living as well as those who try to appear righteous but fall far short of God's righteous demands in their private lives. It would be perfectly fair for to leave us in the slop and the mess that we make of our lives. It would be perfectly fair for him to forget about us prodigal sinners who waste his blessings and leave us to languish in the eternal misery of hell.

But God is gracious and merciful. He does not hold grudges, he is not reluctant to forgive, but in Christ Jesus he takes our sins and freely washes them away. We deliberately dive in to the muck of sin and yet, in love, he rebukes us with his word, leads us to confess our sin, turn to him for forgiveness, and daily he cleanses us. He purifies us from sin and he looks at our sin no more. He ties up the garbage bag our sins and he tosses it into the depths of the sea never to be seen again. He forgives us, restores us through the blood of Christ, and he bestows on us all his blessings that come through faith in Jesus. He gives us his robe of righteousness. He welcomes us back into his family and gives us the full rights of sons. He welcomes us into his house and invites us to his feast. What grace! What undeserved love!

Just as many of us could identify easily with the older brother, the description of the younger brother is one that fits us as well. And this truth of God's amazing grace to the sinner is certainly never to be overlooked by any of us, just because we are regulars at church. We all have sinned against God.

There have been times that we all have wasted the blessings God had graciously given us and we have followed a foolish path of sinful ways. And perhaps it is still difficult for you to get over particular past sins. When this is the case God wants all of us to consider the complete and the immediate forgiveness the father graciously bestows on each of his children. The lost son is completely forgiven and immediately restored. God has thrown his arms around you and has embraced you in his love. Even before we can finish confessing our sins God has covered us in his mercy. You and I by God's amazing grace wear that robe of righteousness. You and I are honored sons and daughters of the Lord. Our Heavenly Father rejoices in us! He wants us to join him in the banquet hall of heaven to feast and to celebrate for all eternity!

May we daily celebrate the joy of finding the lost and sing and rejoice in the amazing grace of God that saves sinners like us. Let us rejoice in the father's love all of our days until we rejoice with him in our home in heaven. So that *when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun* (CW # 379 v. 4). Amen.