

Title: The prodigal Son/the Waiting father.

Luke 15:1-3,11-32

Jesus loves you! Do you really know what that means! In your heart of hearts, do you really feel the magnitude of the gift in the words "God loves you!" During Lent we meditate on how much "we **DO NOT** deserve His love. And yet the creator of this universe, the one who made you the one who will one day judge you still **LOVES YOU**. What a profound gift. It is precisely in proportion to the amount that we really understand, really feel, really know that "God loves us," that we will be able to have peace in our life, that we will be able to love others, that we can live a life of confidence. God loves you.

Today's Gospel is one of my favorite parables. It is the story of the prodigal son. In a parable from Luke 15 we receive one of the best images of the love of God. Luke 15 vs 1 says Jesus is having a little party of friends - tax collectors and "sinners". But around them are the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who are not happy. They mutter "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. They are not here to join the party. They just want to hang on the outskirts, snickering at Jesus and making snide comments. You see, several of the followers of Jesus were not from the "acceptable" crowd. They were the tax collectors, the hookers, the poor, the unclean... Jesus knew who they were and Jesus was cool with this. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law, were not so cool about this. They were the spiritual leaders of the Jews. They had been waiting patiently for the Messiah for a centuries, keeping themselves separate from the surrounding pagan society, keeping themselves Holy as God commanded them. And now here was this Jesus, supposedly the Messiah of God hanging out with the "sinners." And this angered them.?. Why was he paying attention to these "losers?" And Jesus knew what they were thinking. So, he told them a parable to make a point.

Verse 11 of Luke 15 "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' It's important to know the magnitude of what has just happened. Normally, when does a child receive an inheritance? At the death of the parents, right? So, when the son asks for his inheritance early, what is he saying? HE is saying "I wish you were dead. I have no interest in sharing my life with you anymore." In Eastern cultures this is the greatest of insults a child

can give to their parents. But what does the father do? Does he kick the little ingrate out of the house??? No, rather... the opposite. The father gives him his share. Now what does the son do? Does he take it and invest it? Does he donate to a church for the forwarding of God's kingdom? NO! Verse 13 the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. You could just imagine this young kid, thinking "Oh man, now I get to experience all the things that my father kept from me." "At least now I can experience it while I am still young enough to enjoy it. You can imagine him surrounding himself with friends who were more than willing to party with him, that is while he was squandering his money on them. This was the life, partying till midnight, beautiful women fawning on him. This was the life. Finally, I got what I deserve.

Then verse 14 says, "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need." One of the problems with fair-weather friends is that they are your friends so long as the money and partying lasts. When the money is gone. So are they. The boy is now alone. All his inheritance is gone. All that he thought he wanted is gone. In order to survive, he has to get a job. verse 15 So, he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. The boy has sunk very low. For Jews, pigs are considered unclean, untouchable. This little rich Jewish kid is now forced to feed pigs. But not only that but he is so poor and hungry that he longs to fill his stomach with pigs' food. He has become lower than low.... The life he thought he wanted, has left him in the gutter.

So, he gets a bright idea! He thinks, '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. Now what is the problem with his idea? The son is thinking that his father loves him because somehow "he gets something from the son." The son has totally misunderstood the nature of his father's love. The son thinks that the father will love him, only if the son does work for the father. This is what the tax collectors and hookers and sinners thought about God's love. They knew they had left God. They knew that they had done things which displeased God. They knew that the life they lived was empty and left them in the gutter. So, they asked Jesus "what must we do to be saved?" "What

must WE DO to be saved? “What must WE DO to buy back the love and forgiveness of God?” The idea that we must do things to buy the love and forgiveness of God is called “works righteousness.” But Jesus has told them there is nothing they can do. But he has a great surprise.

Back to the parable. The prodigal son is traveling back home. You can just imagine him practicing his speech. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; please make me like one of your hired men.' 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; please make me like one of your hired men.' Trying to see what tone of voice will ensure that his father will have mercy on him. But something surprising happens in Jesus' parable. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; He runs to his son, throws his arms around him and kisses him.

What just happened? In order for “the father to see the son from a long way off,” it meant that the father was looking for his son. It meant that the father was standing by the city gates, every day, since his son left, seeking a sign that his son might be returning. You could only imagine the depth of love which could forgive the personal insult which caused the separation and which could still desire the presence of the loved one. This is the love which Jesus shared with the tax collectors, the hookers and the sinners of the world. God could forgive the sin which originally caused their separation, and still desired them. God loved them dearly.

Returning to the parable. Having received an awesome dose of unconditional love, does the younger son appreciate it? No! In fact, he is oblivious to the great gift being offered to him. Instead, the son insists on delivering his memorized speech, as if it was a necessary pre-requisite for the father's love. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

Many times people who hear the great news of God's love, think they still have to do something to merit God's love. They think that they have to do a certain number of good things to continue to receive God's love. But like the prodigal son, they have misunderstood the love of God. Back to the parable, the son tries to deliver his memorized speech but he doesn't get a chance to finish. The father interrupts... '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. To put the best robe acknowledged that the boy was part of the family again. The ring on his finger, was the family credit card. He could buy anything in the city on credit, with that ring as a token. Though he had squandered his inheritance, all that was left in the family was still his. The father is saying, I don't care what you have done. I am so glad to have you back. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; He was lost and now is found.' So, they began to celebrate.

God's great news to the tax collectors, the hookers, and the sinners and everyone who has misunderstood the depth of God's love the great news is that there is nothing you can do. Jesus has done it all already. God so glad to have you with him. This is God's great news to us as well. There is nothing you can do to get God's love. It is there already. Just put your faith in Jesus. Now that was the great news which Jesus shared with the tax collectors and the sinners through his parable.

But the parable continues. The older son comes in and hears the party. He called one of the servants and asks what was going on. "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf "The older brother became angry and refuses to go in. So, his father goes out and pleads 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!'

Who is the older son? Remember there were other people there too. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were standing there, snickering at Jesus for hanging out with the sinners. Oh, they would have understood the concept of God's unconditional love. They might have understood that God might forgive the sinner,... if the sinner paid for his sins. But they were mad at Jesus. Hey, it's okay to give forgiveness to sinners and all. But what about us? We were the Holy ones. We didn't need forgiveness. What about us? The older son in the parable was the Pharisees and teachers of the law. '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. They were angry because Jesus

didn't pay enough attention to THEM... the ones who had remained faithful to God. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are the older son.

But in the parable, what does the father say to the older son. "'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.'"

What is the point of the parable? There was a message for the "Sinners" of God's love. But there was also a message to the Pharisees. What was Jesus' message to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law? The Father says to the older son (and Jesus to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law) Just as my love for your younger brother does not depend on "what he does for me," nor does it depend on "whether he is obedient or not," in the same way, my love for you also does not depend on "whether you have been obedient or not." That is not the issue. What is important is love. What is important is that my son, your brother, who was once dead to us, is now alive. Love him as I love him. Rejoice!

And get this there is more! What is significant is that the parable ends right there. Why is that significant? It doesn't tell us if the older brother finally understands the nature of love and joins the father to celebrate the return of his brother, OR he chooses to reject his brother and stay away from the party. The parable ends with the father's invitation to the older brother. That is the purpose of the parable. It is an invitation to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the older brothers. Jesus is saying, God loves these tax collectors, hookers and sinners They were once dead, and now they are alive. Come and receive God's love... just as they are receiving it, Join us. That is the purpose of the parable of the prodigal son. It was an invitation to the Pharisees and teachers of the law to share the love of God.

Now even beyond that, notice that Luke, the writer of the Gospel, never records whether the Pharisees and teachers of the law ever join Jesus' party, or whether they choose to reject the tax collectors, hookers and sinners. There reason is that! Luke includes this parable because he wished to extend the same invitation to us. In sharing the awesome nature of God's love in the gospel, Luke is asking, will you love the "unlovable" enough to ask them to join Jesus in his quest to find them? Will you seek after the people of West Covina, and invite them to the party. Will you tell

them “God loves them.” And for any which come to Jesus, your brother or sister who was dead are now alive.