

Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Date: March 18, 2007

Sermon Title: What Would You Do?

What would you do? If you were the older brother, what would you do? If dad had welcomed home that careless brother of yours, what would you do? If you had been slaving away all those years while your brother partied away half of dad's wealth, what would you do? If he seemed to be getting off scott-free, what would you do?

Today's Gospel lesson is *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. It is a story that features a dad and his two sons, but it is not a story about them. It is a story about you and me. It is a story about the depth of God's amazing grace. It is a story about new life being wrought from the jaws of death. It is a story about excess, about extravagance, about grace. It is a story about our response to God's grace, and it leaves us with the question: What would you do?

You know the story. The father has great wealth and two sons. Tradition would have it that once the father's life is over, the older son would inherit the lion's share of the estate – maybe 2/3 or so – and the younger son would inherit the rest. But in a fit of impatience and self-indulgence, the younger son asks for his share early. The father, loving the son, grants his request, and turns over the appropriate share of the estate. The son quickly converts it to cash and runs off to a far country where he squanders it in loose living. But it doesn't last: broke, starving, and desperate, he decides to return home. Even living as a servant in his father's household seems better than where he's ended up. Arriving home he receives two dramatically different responses. His father welcomes him with open arms, even before he is able to complete his confession, but his brother refuses to have anything to do with him whatsoever.

Every time I turn to this story, I learn something new. For instance: have you noticed that this story doesn't have an ending? We don't know the end of this story. Does the father's forgiveness transform the younger son? Or does he end up thinking: "Well, that turned out well. My dad sure is a soft touch. Maybe I'll lay low for a couple of months and try and pull it off again." Does the older son give up on his stubborn resentment, and join his father's joy? Or does he struggle with a lifetime of bitterness about this younger brother who got away with so much? Does the father continue the warm and gracious response the son received upon his return? Or does he call the son into the office the next day and say: "Son, we are very glad that you are home. But now that we've made that clear, about the wealth you squandered..." This morning's skit

FIRST LESSON

JOSHUA 5:9-12

PSALM

PSALM 32

SECOND LESSON

2ND CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 15:1-3, 11B-32

PRAYER OF THE DAY

GOD OF ALL COMPASSION,
YOU WELCOME THE
WAYWARD, AND YOU
EMBRACE US ALL WITH YOUR
MERCY. BY OUR BAPTISM
CLOTHE US WITH GARMENTS
OF YOUR GRACE, AND FEED
US AT THE TABLE OF YOUR
LOVE, THROUGH JESUS
CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND
LORD, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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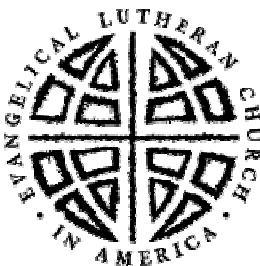
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ends with a question because we don't know how this story ends, and maybe that's the point.

You see, the heart of this story is not in its ending. The heart of this story is in its middle – its very middle. The middle, where we glimpse the power of this father's love. The middle, where a wayward child is welcomed home without question. The middle, where a bitter child is welcomed into the father's grace. The middle, where we get a glimpse of what it means to be the church.

God knows, the church needs these glimpses. Far too many times, over the course of history, the church has been a source of division and suspicion and exclusion. Far too many times, over the course of history, the church has drawn sharp lines of distinction between insiders and outsiders. Far too many times, over the course of history, the church has been the last place where someone might expect to experience grace. How many of us have friends who, as they say, "aren't into organized religion?" The truth is: for many of them, it's not because faith in Jesus Christ isn't compelling. It's because the church has behaved in some manner that has turned them away from God.

Here in this parable, Jesus offers us an image that helps the church see what its mission is all about. It is the image of that aged father, robe hiked up to his hips, arms outstretched in joy, an ear-to-ear grin spitting his face, running across the field to embrace his long-lost son, who has now finally returned home. Before the son is able to confess his sin; before he is able to offer to live in the household as a servant; before he is able to admit that he has sinned both against God and against his father – before any of this could happen, the father runs across the field, overcome with compassion and joy, and he welcomes his son home.

It is a glimpse of what God has meant the church to be all along. Just think, if the church were that gracious. Just think, in all that we say and do as a community and as individuals, if we could offer that kind of love and compassion – just think what kind of impact it could have on people's lives.

Lewis Smedes tells the story of going one hot summer afternoon to visit at the Los Angeles Community jail. He watches pimps bailing out their prostitutes, lawyers interceding for their clients, and drug dealers arguing on behalf of their peddlers. He thought to himself that all of these people could only be labeled the losers in society. During the afternoon he decided to go for a walk. On the way out of the door he met a tall man wearing a dark suit and a clerical collar. He figured he must be a prison chaplain. They struck up a conversation. As it turned out, the man was not a chaplain but an insurance salesman. He devoted one day a week to visiting the men in the jail. He used his distinctive garb so that everybody would know what he was doing. Smedes asked the man: "Aren't most of the men you meet inside this jail hard-core losers?" The man responded: "Maybe they are, but that's not the way I divide people up. The only two categories of people I really care about are the forgiven people and the unforgiven people."ⁱ

ⁱ Quoted in *Emphasis* (March-April, 1992) by Clarke – edited by Robert J. Marshall

That's the work of the church, isn't it: to be constantly sharing God's gift of forgiveness? To be constantly seeking to help people experience the grace of God that has drawn us here this morning. To be running across the field, robe hiked up to our hips, arms outstretched in joy, ear-to-ear grins spitting our faces as we embrace with compassion and joy those who are glimpsing grace for the very first time, or returning to it after some time away.

That's what God calls the church to be. And that is what this is all about: this worship, this music, this preaching, this feast of God that we celebrate here each Sunday. It is a welcome home party we throw every Sunday on the off chance that some hungry, lonely, lost brother or sister has come home for a meal with their family. That is why you and I have to be here. We are both guest and host. We are the ones welcomed home by the father's grace. And we are the ones charged with seeing that anyone who comes to this place now receives the same welcome we ourselves have received.

This story is about the depths of God's love. This story is about new life being wrought from the jaws of death. This story is about excess – about extravagance – about amazing grace. May God grant that this story is about Saint Peter Lutheran Church and our witness in the world. It is what our Lord calls us to be.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 18, 2007)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ¹¹ "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

¹ Ἦσαν δὲ αὐτῷ ἐγγίζοντες πάντες οἱ τελῶναι καὶ οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἀκούειν αὐτοῦ. ² καὶ διεγόγγυζον οἱ τε Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς λέγοντες ὅτι οὗτος ἁμαρτωλοὺς προσδέχεται καὶ συνεσθίει αὐτοῖς. ³ Εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην λέγων· ¹¹ ἄνθρωπος τις εἶχεν δύο υἱούς. ¹² καὶ εἶπεν ὁ νεώτερος αὐτῶν τῷ πατρὶ· πάτερ, δός μοι τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μέρος τῆς οὐσίας. ὁ δὲ διεῖλεν αὐτοῖς τὸν βίον. ¹³ καὶ μετ' οὐ πολλὰς ἡμέρας συναγαγὼν πάντα ὁ νεώτερος υἱὸς ἀπεδήμησεν εἰς χώραν μακρὰν καὶ ἐκεῖ διεσκόρπισεν τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ ζῶν ἀσώτως. ¹⁴ δαπανήσαντος δὲ αὐτοῦ πάντα ἐγένετο λιμὸς ἰσχυρὰ κατὰ τὴν χώραν ἐκείνην, καὶ αὐτὸς ἤρξατο ὑστερεῖσθαι. ¹⁵ καὶ πορευθεὶς ἐκολλήθη ἐνὶ τῶν πολιτῶν τῆς χώρας ἐκείνης, καὶ ἐπεμψεν αὐτὸν εἰς τοὺς ἀγροὺς αὐτοῦ βόσκειν χοίρους, ¹⁶ καὶ ἐπεθύμει χορτασθῆναι ἐκ τῶν κερατίων ὧν ἤσθιον οἱ χοῖροι, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐδίδου αὐτῷ. ¹⁷ εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν ἔφη· πόσοι μίσθιοι τοῦ πατρός μου περισσεύονται ἄρτων, ἐγὼ δὲ λιμῷ ὡδὲ ἀπόλλυμαι. ¹⁸ ἀναστὰς πορεύσομαι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ ἐρῶ αὐτῷ· πάτερ, ἡμαρτον εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιον σου, ¹⁹ οὐκέτι εἰμὶ ἄξιος κληθῆναι υἱὸς σου· ποιήσον με ὡς ἓνα τῶν μισθίων σου. ²⁰ καὶ ἀναστὰς ἦλθεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ. Ἐτι δὲ αὐτοῦ μακρὰν ἀπέχοντος εἶδεν αὐτὸν ὁ πατήρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐσπλαγχνίσθη καὶ δραμῶν ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ καὶ κατεφίλησεν αὐτόν. ²¹ εἶπεν δὲ ὁ υἱὸς αὐτῷ· πάτερ, ἡμαρτον εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιον σου, οὐκέτι εἰμὶ ἄξιος κληθῆναι υἱὸς σου. ²² εἶπεν δὲ

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ὁ πατήρ πρὸς τοὺς δούλους αὐτοῦ· ταχὺ ἐξενέγκατε στολήν τὴν πρώτην καὶ ἐνδύσατε αὐτόν, καὶ δότε δακτύλιον εἰς τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ καὶ ὑποδήματα εἰς τοὺς πόδας,²³ καὶ φέρετε τὸν μόσχον τὸν σιτευτόν, θύσατε, καὶ φαγόντες εὐφρανθῶμεν,²⁴ ὅτι οὗτος ὁ υἱὸς μου νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἀνέζησεν, ἦν ἀπολωλὼς καὶ εὐρέθη. καὶ ἤρξαντο εὐφραίνεσθαι.²⁵ Ἦν δὲ ὁ υἱὸς αὐτοῦ ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἐν ἀγρῷ· καὶ ὡς ἐρχόμενος ἤγγισεν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, ἤκουσεν συμφωνίας καὶ χορῶν,²⁶ καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἕνα τῶν παίδων ἐπυνθάνετο τί ἂν εἴη ταῦτα.²⁷ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἤκει, καὶ ἔθυσεν ὁ πατήρ σου τὸν μόσχον τὸν σιτευτόν, ὅτι ὑγιαίνοντα αὐτὸν ἀπέλαβεν.²⁸ ὠργίσθη δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν εἰσελθεῖν, ὁ δὲ πατήρ αὐτοῦ ἐξελθὼν παρεκάλει αὐτόν.²⁹ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν τῷ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ· ἰδοὺ τοσαῦτα ἔτη δουλεύω σοι καὶ οὐδέποτε ἐντολήν σου παρήλθον, καὶ ἐμοὶ οὐδέποτε ἔδωκας ἔριφον ἵνα μετὰ τῶν φίλων μου εὐφρανθῶ.³⁰ ὅτε δὲ ὁ υἱὸς σου οὗτος ὁ καταφαγὼν σου τὸν βίον μετὰ πορνῶν ἦλθεν, ἔθυσας αὐτῷ τὸν σιτευτὸν μόσχον.³¹ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· τέκνον, σὺ πάντοτε μετ' ἐμοῦ εἶ, καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐμὰ σὰ ἐστίν·³² εὐφρανθῆναι δὲ καὶ χαρῆναι ἔδει, ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἐζησεν, καὶ ἀπολωλὼς καὶ εὐρέθη. ^{iv}

^{iv} St. Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

Skit:

AFTER THE PRODIGAL SON RETURNS (EDITED)

Luke 15:25-32

CHARACTERS:

James: Young man in his twenties. He is dressed in work clothes.

Father: Older man in his late forties or early fifties. He is dressed casually, but not in work clothes.

SCENE: *The front steps of the house. There could be laughter and music in the background as James takes his place center stage. As he begins to speak, the laughter and music fade.*

James: Do you believe this? *(He looks back toward the house and then back to the audience.)* My little brother leaves with his part of the inheritance, he's gone for months, and then he returns, broken and penniless. *(He looks at the house and then back at the audience once again.)* And what does my dad do when this good-for-nothing bum returns? Does he punish him? Heck no! He throws a party for that worthless piece of trash. I don't believe it. *(He sits down with his head hung low.)*

Dad: James. *(Entering, the son does not answer.)* James. *(The son looks up and the father sits, putting his arm around him.)* James, what's wrong? *(James jumps up and moves away from the father.)*

James: What's wrong? You've got to be kidding.

Dad: I don't know what you mean. What's wrong?

James: You really don't know, do you?

Dad: No, I really don't.

James: What in God's name were you thinking of?

Dad: *(He stands.)* James, I don't know what this is all about. I've been so busy with the party.

James: That's part of it.

Dad: I'm sorry, but I was so happy that your brother came home.

James: And that's the worst part.

Dad: The worst part is that your brother came home?

James: No, the worst part is that you welcomed him as though he'd just been away for a few days.

Dad: Well, he was away.

James: Away for months. Wasting your money. Wasting his life.

Dad: But he's my son, your brother.

James: He *was* your son. He *was* my brother. But no more.

Dad: He is still my son.

James: No, my younger brother is dead. I'm the only son you've got left.

Dad: That's not true.

James: That's the way it has to be if you want me to stick around here.

Dad: But you are both my sons. Don't you understand?

James: All I understand is that this . . . this so-called son of yours wasted everything. And now he is playing on your sympathy.

Dad: I love your brother and I love you. I'm happy he is back, and I'm happy that you never left.

James: You may love him, but you certainly don't love or respect me.

Dad: Why do you say that?

James: Think about it. I've faithfully served you for years now. I did everything you told me to do. I never questioned you. And never once did you throw a party for me. Never once did you tell me to invite my friends

over for a party. But when this so-called son of yours took your money, spent it on loose women and drink, and came home penniless, you treated him like the conquering hero.

Dad: James, I'm sorry. This has more to do with you and me, than it does with your brother.

James: What do you mean?

Dad: I didn't tell you to have a party, James, because I thought you knew that everything here is yours. This land and this house are yours. The money I have is your money. It's all here for you to use. I thought you knew. I'm sorry.

James: *(He points toward the house.)* But he gets away with murder. He isn't punished for what he's done. It's not right!

Dad: When your brother left, I lost his love. I never quit loving him or loving you. Your brother has lost part of his life, something he'll never be able to get back. Is there any punishment I can place upon him that would be worse than that?

James: But you seem to be rewarding him, and in a way, punishing me.

Dad: James, you and I had something that your brother lost and will never be able to get back. We were never apart. And unless you leave, I promise we'll never be apart. Come and celebrate. Celebrate the fact that your brother is home and also celebrate that we've never been apart.

James: Whatever. Go back in. I'll think about it.

Dad: Okay. *(He starts to leave and then turns back.)* James, no matter what you think, I love you. *(He walks off stage.)*

James: *(He turns to the audience.)* What should I do? *(And then, looking directly at the audience.)* What would you do? *(He walks off in a different direction.)*