

Fourth Sunday in Lent; March 27, 2022
+ Luke 15:1-2, 11-32 +
"Fall into Your Father's Arms"

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all that he had and traveled to a distant country. There he wasted his wealth with reckless living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob pods that the pigs were eating, but no one would give him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"

"He got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick, bring out 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 us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.' Then they began to celebrate.

"His older son was in the field. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant told him, 'Your brother is here! Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' The older brother was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

"He answered his father, 'Look, these many years I've been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'

"The father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.'"

Whenever Jesus tells a story, it is important to note who he's speaking to. When Jesus tells the story of the Lost Son, he is speaking to a group of people who resent God's forgiveness of sins. Notoriously sinful people are gathering to Jesus to hear him speak; Jesus welcomes them. As he does, certain people object to the grace Jesus displays: **All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."**

So these are the two groups Jesus speaks to: the notoriously sinful, as well as the self-righteous who resent divine grace. So, as you listen to Jesus' story, here are some important questions to ask yourself. Which part do the tax collectors and sinners play in this story? And what part do the Pharisees and experts in the law play? Finally, and most importantly, what part in this parable do you play?

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.'

Jesus is a master story teller. We know that if we want someone to listen to a story to the end, it is best to start fast and grab attention. Jesus does that by jarring his audience. A man has two sons. One of them requests his inheritance early. From Jesus' audience this would have drawn a gasp. Today there is a lot of thought about leaving inheritances – at least chunks of them – before the owner's death. In Jesus' world, this request is shockingly rebellious and hateful. In essence the younger son says, "Father, you have lived too long. And I want your money more than I want to be with you." And his son does not say please. And he does not form his request as a question, but a demand. And what does the father do? Does the father cry? Does he scold his insolent son for making this request? Does he beg him to stay?

"So he divided his property between them.

The father grants his younger son's demand. Spoiler alert: The father in this story is God, the heavenly Father. And what does he do when his child hatefully tells him that he'd rather have the world than him? He says, "Your decision. Bye." As we'll see, it's not because he wants it that way. He wants his children with him. But if they insist on leaving, he does let them go.

Also: it is important to note that the older son, whom we have not yet met in person, also accepts his share early. But he does stay home and he keeps working. Working. Working.

"Not many days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and traveled to a distant country.

Where is this "distant country" exactly? What is its name? The distant country is anywhere people go without God looking for satisfaction and fulfillment. It is anywhere people look for joy and happiness apart from their loving Father. For some could be blatantly godless places like the bottom of bottle or the end of a needle. For others it could be places that look harmless, or even wholesome: their office, even their family. But wherever a quest for fulfillment goes without God, it's a land far away from him. And it will end badly.

Meanwhile, back at home, the older son is still working. Working. Working.

"There he wasted his wealth with reckless living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need.

The older son will later clue us in on what "reckless living" means. But this younger son, so far from his father's embrace, is now trying with everything he has to find joy and satisfaction. He has his youth. He has pockets bulging with money. He has every source of worldly fun around him. And in the end, it's all a wasteful, prodigal effort.

Any attempt to find life to full apart from the heavenly Father is nothing but a waste. It doesn't matter how much money is on hand, or how many beautiful people, or how much fun. It can't go on forever.

Eventually it all ends. And as long as the person stays in the distant land, away from the Father, there will be spiritual famine and need...and worse:

“He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

Sinful sons who leave their loving father looking for the good life wind up in deepest shame and desperation. A Jewish boy working for a Gentile is not good. A Jewish boy feeding unclean pigs is unthinkable. And anyone wanting to eat what pigs eat is horrible.

No one gave him anything. People leave the warmth of their heavenly Father thinking something better is out there for them. And when they do, they don't just end up in situations that are bad, or unthinkable or horrible. They end up spiritually empty. Nothing from anyone. This is not rock bottom. This is hell on earth. What we'll hear the father say later is true: The younger son is now dead. He is lost.

Meanwhile, the older son is at home working. Working. Working.

But now, before we go on, do you remember the questions you were supposed to keep in mind? What part do the tax collectors play in this story? The Pharisees? And what about you? What part do you play?

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying of hunger!

It has been pointed out, often and rightly, that rather than “The Lost/Prodigal Son”, a better title for this story would be, “The Father’s Love.” At the bottom line, what brings this foolish son to his senses? What calls him home? Yes, he’s hungry. Yes, he’s disgraced. But if he knew his father to be hard and unforgiving, he would stay that way forever. There would be no hope for him. But he remembers his father’s goodness! He remembers his father’s generous and loving spirit, even toward those who aren’t his sons! This is what makes him say:

“I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’

Like a husband who has forgotten his anniversary, the son prepares and practices his apology. And every word of the first two sentences is true. He has sinned against his God by sinning against his father. He was rude and hateful. He is no longer worthy to be called his father’s son. This is not false humility. This is true humility. He forgets all pride. His hope is in his father’s grace. The only thing is: he doesn’t quite understand just how forgiving his father is!

Meanwhile, the older son is still working. Working. Working.

“He got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him.

The father cannot wait for his son to come home! Can't you see this father up nights on end, pacing around his property, looking over the horizon and saying to himself, “Please let my son come home. Just let him come. It doesn't matter what he's done. Just let him come.” And when he finally sees his boy coming over the hill, he can't wait. The father, although he's older, runs to meet the son. The one wronged hugs and kisses. This is all the father wants to do: take his son back, show his love, and forgive...immediately:

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

Do you remember the confession the younger son had planned? Well, that was most it. He never quite gets to the last part about, “Make me like a hired servant.” He doesn’t quite get that last line out, because his father’s forgiveness is so fast that he doesn’t have time to get it out!

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick, bring out 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 us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’ Then they began to celebrate.

His forgiveness is too fast to allow his son to finish his confessing. And it is so thorough and unmistakable that it demands a robe – no, wait, the best robe – a ring...and sandals...and a calf. But not just a calf – an expensive one. And this forgiveness is so big that there has to be a feast and a giant celebration. And now the father says it. The man he has hugged and kissed and forgiven so fast and fully is **this son of mine**. He **was dead**, but all that’s in the past. Now he **is alive again**. He **was lost**, but we can forget what was. Because now **he is found**.

We know why our heavenly Father forgives just like the father in the story. It is because of the man telling the story. It is Jesus’ holy life, lived as a substitute for every dead and lost sinner. It is Jesus’ death on the cross, which takes all human sin away, that moves our heavenly Father to forgive us a full and fast as this father.

And we need it as surely as the son in this story. Whether it is the unbelieving world, or the devil, or our sinful nature, or any combination of the three, we have all sought our distant lands away from our heavenly Father. We have all felt the pull to find our fulfillment and satisfaction away from God. We have all turned away and gone running – maybe to places that are obviously evil, or maybe to places that were only evil for us because we went there to be satisfied without God.

And his goodness brings us back. The promise of his gracious forgiveness woos our hearts. And when it does, he forgives for Jesus’ sake. And he doesn’t just forgive. He forgives fast and fully. He calls us sons and daughters of his, alive and found.

And wouldn’t it be nice if the story ended here? But Jesus has another spiritual point to make with this story. So it goes on. But before it does, remember to be asking yourself: What part do the tax collectors play in this story? The Pharisees? And what part do you play?

“His older son was in the field. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant told him, ‘Your brother is here! Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’

Guess what the older son’s been up to during this joyous homecoming? What else? Working in the field. The same thing he’s been doing all the while his younger brother has been demanding and running and wasting and disgracing. How his skin must crawl at the first words out that servant’s mouth: **Your brother**.

“The older brother was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. He answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I’ve been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends.’

Father, look how hard I've worked for you. Look how good I've been. I've never disobeyed your command. So if you think I'm taking him back as my brother, forget it.

“But when this son of yours arrived after wasting money with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”

His younger brother cannot be his younger brother. He's too bad. And this older brother, he's so good. Always working all these years, never disobeying a command. Except, if you'll remember: he did take his share of the inheritance early, too. He stayed, yes, but he also took his early. And now he claims his father has never given him anything! So it turns out, despite all of his work, he needs forgiveness, too. He just doesn't see it.

“The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. But it was fitting for us to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’”

The father loves all his children. He wants this older son, too. But the older son wants to stand on his own two feet, on his own work. And so he stands outside his father's embrace. Meanwhile, the younger son falls into his father's arms, finding forgiveness and celebration.

And this is how it goes: if you want to work for God, work work work, and then stand on your own two feet, you stand alone. But if you see what a slug you have been, and fall in his arms forgiveness, then you've got it for Jesus' sake. You've got his love to fattened calf level.

So: what part do the Pharisees play in this story? They're the older brother. Always working for God (or so they thought). Working, and depending on their work to please God. And when they look at the rotten tax collectors and see divine forgiveness heading their way, the Pharisees can't handle it. They stand on their self-righteous feet, outside the father's embrace.

What part do the tax collectors play? They are sinners, no doubt. But they are the ones listening to Jesus, who, as the Son of the heavenly Father, welcomes them and eats with them. They are hearing the love of God, and coming to their senses. They are falling in the Father's arms, and receiving his forgiveness.

But now, most importantly: What part do you play?

The two parts you don't want to be: the younger son before he repents, and the older son. How can you avoid wandering off to your own distant lands, looking for something better than your Father's embrace? Simply remember who your Father is. Why would we ever want to go anywhere without him, looking for greener pastures? There are no greener pastures than there are with God. He is pure love and grace. Remember his great love for you in Christ, and you won't wander.

And how can you avoid being the snobby, unforgiving, self-righteous older son? Like him, we might like to think we've been good sons and daughters, who've stayed with God always and done nothing but work, work, work. We must remember that we have acted like the younger son, too. We all have wandered from God. We've all gone to low spiritual places, and needed to remember his goodness and come back to him. Only because of his grace, we have returned to his embrace to receive forgiveness full and fast. Remember that you have been the younger son, and then you cannot be the older. You cannot be the one who looks down on other sinners and resents God's forgiveness for them, because you've needed it, too.

And finally, the parts in this story we do want to play: the younger brother after he comes to his senses. Every day, to one extent or another, every Christian strays from their Father. They may wander a short distance or long. So, every day, come back to him and say, **“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”** Fall into his arms every day. He watches for us each night to appear over the hill, and he comes running to us with his arms open. You will not even finish your confession before he throws a party in heaven.

What is the last part we want to play? We want to be like the father. Obviously, the father in this story is God the Father, who shows perfect forgiveness in Jesus’ saving work. And we can never forgive perfectly like him. And yet we do pray: **“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”** Once you’ve fallen into your Father’s arms and felt his gracious heartbeat against soul, forgive like him. And rejoice every time any other sinner falls into his arms. Every time it happens, no matter how low that sinner has fallen, call him your brother again. Amen.