

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 27, 2022

"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." The opposition to Jesus spoke those words as criticism—he can't be good and associate with such lowlives, they reasoned—but we cling to them with immense relief and with joyous faith. Sinners are whom Jesus came to rescue. His parables that followed: the lost sheep, lost coin and the one before us, the lost or prodigal son, all demonstrate his seeking love for the lost. So we consider their words,

THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS

- I. As you return from wandering
- II. As you repent of self-righteousness

Many parents can identify with the story Jesus told and all of us see our place when we consider its spiritual meaning. Some of the stresses that occur in a growing family are evident. The younger of two sons felt hemmed in. His father was too restrictive. The son couldn't be himself in that environment. Add in the inheritance customs of the time, that the firstborn son received the home place. Son #2 had to get away.

One aspect of home he didn't care to leave behind, and that was the comfortable standard of living. So he made the request, "Father, give me my share of the estate." It wasn't entirely unusual since he would be receiving no real estate. The cash could help him get started elsewhere. His intentions, however, soon became clear. He left home for a distant area where he could live as he pleased. We can picture him rushing from one excess to another, spending his fortune freely. The parable states he "squandered his wealth in wild living." Eventually the funds ran out. The good times were over and the companions disappeared. What's worse, famine struck the land. He was broke and the land had nothing to offer. He had to work for a living but few opportunities existed as no one wanted an extra mouth to feed. He finally landed a job feeding pigs, rock bottom for a Jewish person since pigs were unclean animals under Old Testament dietary law. His wages provided only a starvation diet. What he fed the pigs, the pods of the carob tree, even looked good. They were viewed as the poorest of fruits, fit only for animal consumption, but at least something to stop the rumbling in his stomach, he reasoned.

When reduced to those conditions, "he came to his senses." He remembered his home with fondness. The servants there had it better than he did now. He decided to return, confessing, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Being a servant would be good enough.

As he approached home, his father eyed him in the distance. No doubt he had been watching constantly, hoping for his return. Although the dirty, half-starved, tattered figure scarcely resembled the son who had left, his heart went out to him and "he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." The son then made his confession, offering no excuses, and asked to be a servant. His father would have none of it, not in anger but in joy. He still was a son and had returned home. Get some clothing fitting his station, a long robe, not the short garb of a working man, a ring and sandals for his feet. Prepare a royal reception to welcome my son home. He's back at last! Before, it was like he was dead. Now he was home. What joy! The welcome exceeded the son's hopes. The father showed unconditional, total acceptance.

We readily recognize that Jesus was showing us how God deals with penitent sinners. He once stated his purpose: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." The Pharisees with their self-pride may not have liked it, but the action of the parable is repeated often in relationships with our heavenly Father. Many a person has rebelled against God and strayed off on his own. The privileges which the son had experienced at home remind us of one who has grown up within the family of God but failed to appreciate the great blessings of it. They turned their back on the Lord and joined the world for its apparent pleasures, attractions and idolatries. The person sought freedom from Christian values that seemed to cramp their lifestyle.

All goes well for a while, sometimes a long while. However, temporal gifts vanish eventually. Calamities strike or maybe it's an inner struggle for peace of mind that brings the sinner to his senses. He realizes the error of his ways. Then he recalls the Word he had once learned and returns to the Lord begging for mercy. Realizing your unworthiness and casting yourself on the Lord is what repentance is all about. The Bible promises, "He who conceals his sins shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." The welcome for the son fittingly pictures God's forgiveness of sinners and salvation by grace. He welcomes us back with open arms, despite our total, repulsive sinfulness. The angels of heaven join the celebration when the sinner repents.

All of us have turned our backs on our loving Lord at one time or another. He doesn't force us to obey his will. We stubbornly and foolishly follow our own desires. We reject his ways. From sad and sometimes painful experience we learn the hard way that sin isn't all that great. Each time our Savior welcomes us back with joy. He promises, "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away." He forgives and forgives again and again, for such episodes occur repeatedly in our lives. Our sinful nature causes us to succumb daily to the temptations of Satan. Even so, Jesus places no restrictions on the forgiveness he grants. No matter how

wild or wicked your past or how frequently you have run away, he calls you to come to him seeking forgiveness. He stands waiting and watching for your return and grants full pardon. He will bless you beyond your greatest expectations. Most of all, he blesses you with the promise of eternal salvation. How marvelous it is that God receives returning wanderers! This man welcomes sinners. Praise him!

II.

Praise wasn't forthcoming from the enemies of Jesus for that truth. It made him even more objectionable to them. They didn't think they were included in the category of sinners. So the end of the parable demonstrates that Jesus welcomes sinners as you repent of self-righteousness. The teachers of the law and especially the Pharisees prided themselves in their strict obedience to God's commands. Although it is true that they missed the larger message of Scripture about Jesus, they paid close attention to many of its details concerning outward behavior. They fasted often; they tithed carefully; they sought to avoid ceremonial uncleanness. Therefore they felt they were a cut above most others, not only of the Gentles but also within the Jewish nation. Tax collectors were on the bottom rung of society. After all, they helped the hated Roman government in gathering taxes. In addition, many were dishonest. Therefore the synagogue was off limits to them. Other people had committed publicly known sins and were caught at it. Certainly a devout soul must avoid them also.

Yet it was just such people that Jesus was attracting because they felt the need for his mercy. He didn't condone their past sins, but he did open the way of salvation to them as he announced forgiveness. His message of love and forgiveness was exactly what they needed to hear—and they realized it. They came eagerly to hear him, not merely to see miracles. They were attracted like iron fillings to a magnet. They hung on his words. They couldn't get enough. Jesus welcomed them, associated with them and ate with them. They fit the picture of the younger, wayward son.

What about the older son? He wasn't home when his brother returned. As he came in from the field and heard the music and dancing, he naturally wanted to know what was going on. A servant reported the day's events. The reception was in full swing; all that was needed was the presence of the older brother. He, however, wanted no part of it. The urging of his father revealed his attitude: a recital of his virtues. "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders." Hm, really? I wonder. He felt he deserved special treatment but hadn't received it. He was actually charging his father with unfairness.

The father reminded him of the advantages he enjoyed at home. Besides, since his brother had already received his inheritance, whatever profits earned since he left

or increase in value of the home farm would belong to the older brother. There was no need for jealousy. Be glad your brother is back.

That part of the parable aimed at the self-righteous, at the Pharisees then and today. Temptations don't seem to bother them much. If that's the case for you, thank God rather than take personal credit. He fulfilled the promise we heard last week about help in temptation. Don't seek reward or recognition. Rejoice in the blessings and fellowship with your heavenly Father that you have enjoyed.

In reality we all need to be glad that God doesn't deal with us on the basis of what is deserved. We would die eternally, also the self-righteous. All of us need to repent and return to God. The attitude of the Pharisees broke the Savior's basic command to love one another. They were lost as much as those who openly rebelled.

Notice how the father dealt with the angry older son. He didn't tear into him for his unloving attitude. He begged him to come in. That's how God deals with us sinners. He pleads with us to repent. He wants to lead the self-righteous to repentance and faith just as much as the wandering souls. With this parable Jesus was preparing them to welcome into his Church even more whom they looked down on, such as the Gentiles.

Sadly, we can identify with the older son also. Do we tend to look down on others whom we deem less worthy than ourselves? Do we hold back from sharing God's message with those whose lives don't meet our approval? They are the ones who especially need it. Don't sit smugly in judgment of others, acting as if you do no wrong. Watch out when you are tempted toward pride in your history of involvement with the church based on outward association or activities. When we seek praise from others or favor from God because of our supposed good life, ignoring or conveniently forgetting the ugly parts, we are living the part of the Pharisee. We need to repent and humble ourselves before God. The same forgiveness which Jesus won by his death on the cross removes also the guilt of this sin.

Satan works on us to err in one direction or the other, either to wander from the Lord in wicked living or to be self-righteous in times of faithfulness. Be on guard for both pitfalls and repent of all sins. Remember as you come to him in sorrow for your sins that he welcomes you with open arms and complete forgiveness, the same arms that stretched out wide on the cross. This man welcomes sinners. He receives us as his own and will one day welcome us into his eternal home where sins will trouble us no more.