

Shepherd of the Springs Lutheran Church
3rd Sunday after Trinity

Text: Luke 15: 11-32

Theme: When an Attitude Adjustment is Necessary

And the son said to him; "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."(vs. 21)

The parable that has been named the prodigal son comes in the midst of a whole string of Jesus' parables that Luke strings together in chapters 14 through 16. The context of these, loosely speaking, reaction on Jesus part to the criticism He is receiving by hostile religious leaders concerning his continual association with disreputable and lowly elements of contemporary Jewish society. His parables in this section particularly present the more outrageous aspects of the grace of God and how it is the gifted-ness of God, without even a shred of individual merit or virtue, that rules in the Kingdom of God. On this note, the parable of the prodigal son is no exception. Indeed, the Parable of the Prodigal Son presents an opportunity to expand our understanding and appreciation of how it is that the most offensive behaviors on our part cannot void or compromise God's intention to treat us with nothing but pure grace. Nevertheless, this story as with all the parables that Jesus told about the Kingdom of God, requires the listener to bring a correct pre-understanding in order for the parable to expand on one's understanding. Without a proper understanding about the Kingdom of God that Jesus has come to establish, His parables either cannot be understood at all or it outrages your sense of fairness and acceptability.

We could perhaps call this the parable of the ungrateful brothers. The problems that it seeks to raise about the offensiveness of God's grace among those who already belong to God's family is illustrated by both sons in the parable. There are problems about a correct awareness and an appropriate appreciation of what it means to be family in the household of God. Let's review the story. The younger of the two sons has become progressively disenchanted with living as a faithful son in his father's household and demands his inheritance that he might use it to find a more fulfilling life on his own indulging in worldly pleasures. After becoming destitute and discovering that the pigs he must feed have a better life - indeed, if things continue he believes he will not survive - he resolves to go back home, confess his sins, and beg his father for a better life by becoming a slave in his former household. The crux of the parable now comes with the contrasting reactions of the father and the older son. The father considers the event simply the joyous return of his lost son and therefore a time for great celebration. The older son, however, does not see things that way at all. He is put out by all the joy and celebration at the return of his brother. He is resentful because he considers himself and his continued service to the household to be much more deserving of celebration and a good party than the returning home of his rebellious younger brother.

There you have it - two contrasting understandings and appreciations about

what it means to be in the household of God. I would like to suggest that what we have here that is very common among Christians is two competing understandings of what it means to have a gracious God. The first is very popular, and it is represented by not one, but by both of the sons. It is the belief that God's graciousness is that which makes up for our weaknesses and failings. God mercifully fills the gap between the flawed people we are and the people we ought to be. It is expected that we do our best to act as faithful as we can as His sons and daughters with the understanding that God's grace and forgiveness will cover and restore us when we falter and fail. God will pick us back up and give us the motive and power to do better the next time. If however, we decide to turn our backs on doing our best at all the things that God expects of his children, then all bets are off. If we are not going to do our part, we void God's gracious willingness to forgive and restore us when we fail and fall into sin.

Here is the perspective represented by both brothers. He compares his working hard to do his best serving in his father's household to that of his philandering, loose living brother and is outraged at his father's joyous reception. He cannot understand how the father could consider his younger brother as still a son whose return should be celebrated. After all, his brother squandered his inheritance. He gave up the life of a faithful son in the household. Both of these realities must have cancelled any right for anyone to consider him still to have the status of a son, much less whose return should be celebrated. And the younger brother, the prodigal, has the same perspective. He has returned home simply to eat some humble pie in the interests of trying to persuade his father to take him on as a slave to the household. Both brothers are operating with the same understanding of how one can remain a son in the household. Both realize that they did nothing to become sons in the household. They were simply born into it. Here is where their sense of undeservedness is rooted. However, to remain sons they must be as faithful as they can in order to retain their inheritance and all that it means to remain a son. The prodigal believes he cashed that inheritance in when he left to make his own way in the world. The older brother thought the same. They both, however, were wrong, and it is the father who must set them straight - much to the joy of the prodigal and the ungrateful indignation of his older brother.

You can only choose how you are going to respond to God's graciousness at any given time. You can gratefully respond thankfully with prayer, praise, and service to Christ through your neighbor in the work God has given you to do here in this life. Or, you can discount the value of your inheritance and seek after a life that can lead to your destruction by relying on false worldly gods and pursuits that will choke out your life in Christ. The life of destruction is not one that voids your baptism, it separates you from it. A healthy faith life in Christ requires a continual healthy awareness and appreciation of what life would be like if lived apart for God and the blessings that flow from his grace and mercy. The prodigal son only later learns that it is life itself that flows from living in the father's household. You cannot appreciate that which you have little or no awareness. The richness and necessity of God's grace can only be

understood and appreciated to the degree of your awareness and appreciation of the magnitude of your sin and the fallenness of this world. Point number one of this parable, but then also there is point number two - the utter outrageousness of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

Yes, you did nothing to become a member of God's household. You were reborn into it in your baptism. That was none of your doing and you know that. As God has given you new life in Christ, adopted you into his household, and given you the full inheritance of His kingdom, you did nothing to deserve this. He did it all on his own. This is the common, rather uncontroversial understanding of most of us Lutherans. We understand our Lord's baptism and its undeserved blessings that it has brought us. But, now here is the crux of the matter that this parable pushes us to understand and appreciate about the grace that is ours in our Lord's baptism. You do nothing and you can do nothing to *retain* that grace. Your good works do not preserve this grace, and your sins do not void it. God's grace and forgiveness is and always remains unconditional. What YOU do, never can affect its presence and its totality. God has and always will reckon you as forgiven and righteous for the sake of the saving work of Christ. You can do nothing to secure or change this reality. And that is the outrageousness of God's grace represented by the father in the parable. If you are a return back home child of God, you can celebrate that reality. And, if you are a stay at home child of God, you can celebrate that reality too. In any case, it is always a reason to party in the Kingdom of God for God's grace is and always has been sufficient for you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. A-men.