

14 March 2010  
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Coming Home to Prodigal Love”

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A man had two sons.

The first son was every parent’s dream. He was polite and respectful. He always did his chores. He never talked back. He was dependable and honest, and a good student. He went to church, was always well-dressed, ate his vegetables, and even volunteered to help the poor. The whole town thought well of him, and thought well of his father because of him. What a blessing, they thought. Maybe God even has special plans for him, that he be a ruler or leader someday.

The second son, however, turned out not so good. In fact, he was what we would call a *slacker*. He was the rebellious one. His chores often went undone. He questioned his father’s authority. He spent most days hanging out with his friends at the mall, wasted his money, and stole from his father. He got suspended from school, liked to fight, was disruptive in church, and some nights got so drunk he never came home at all. The whole town thought they’d be better off without him, and felt sorry for his father because of him. What a burden, they thought. What a shame.

Then one day, this son decides to leave home. Sick and tired of being stuck in this house with all these rules, he’s going to be free. He’s going to do what he wants. No more nagging, no more chores. Nothin’ but the good life ahead for him! And that he might have the means to go and live the high life, he gets his father to cash in his life insurance policy and take a second mortgage on the house, that he could have his inheritance now. Who cares that that would cause hardship for his father? Who cares that that money was for college? Who cares? It’s his and he wants it. And he’s outta there. He doesn’t even remember if he bothered to wave good-bye.

After that, things went on as usual in the father’s house. In fact, things were a little more peaceful without the troublemaker around. But everyday, right before dinner, the faithful son would see his father staring out the window, with a sad look on his face, deep in thought. He never really understood, just that it happened everyday.

Well soon, reports started coming back to the father about his son. He was making quite a name for himself - and not a good one. And the town thought how fortunate the father was to be rid of such a son. And the older brother thought how fortunate they were to be rid of such a rascal. *But each day, the father just looked out the window . . .*

After a while, though, the reports coming back to the father changed. His son was living on the street; he had gotten evicted. His money had run out, and those he thought were his friends, who had hung out with him when he was paying for everything, left him. Last they heard, he was working for less than minimum wage for a pig farmer. And the town thought: he getting what he deserves. And the older brother thought: with pigs is where he belongs. But the father kept looking out the window . . .

Until one day, looking out the window, he saw him! He saw his son. The clothes were tattered and torn, his hair and beard were dirty and matted, he was walking with a limp . . . but he would know his son anywhere, and that was him! And so he bounded down the steps, ran through the town, and almost bowled his son over. Despite the pig-stench, he hugged him tighter than he ever had before, and kissed him through that disgusting beard. And what? Did you say something son? Uh, nevermind. We have to celebrate! Get you cleaned up! We'll invite the whole town. You're home. *You're home.*

And the son said: <mouth gaping open>  
And the town said: <mouth gaping open>

But the older son said: *wait a minute! You're throwing a party for him?* For him who gives sons everywhere a bad name. For him who wasn't content with normal sins, but had to be the sinner of all sinners. For him who left and stuck us with all the work. For him who doesn't care about anyone but himself. For him who wished we all were dead. For him who gave us nothing but grief, and who's back probably just to take advantage of you again. You're throwing a party for him.

Well what about me, huh? I didn't do any of that. I'm stuck here, but I never complained about it (at least to you). I always did what you told me to do, even if I didn't want to. He's the scumbag; I'm the faithful one. When am I gonna get a party, huh? When do I get to have some fun? What about me? And he was so angry with his father that his face turned all red, the veins in his neck with bulging out, and the whole town could practically hear him yelling at his father.

And the father quietly said: I love you, my son. With all my heart. Everything I have is yours. But I love your brother also - that doesn't mean I love you less. He has been lost for so long, in so many ways. For a while I thought I would never see him

again alive. But now he is back. I forgive him. Whether he will take advantage of my love and generosity again I do not know. But I love him, and I will always love him, just as I will always love you. So come and celebrate - not for him, but for me. My house is full again.

And the party went on all night. The people of the town marveling at the love and forgiveness of the father. The younger son wondering how his father could ever forgive him and welcome him back. And they hardly noticed the father, who kept standing by the window with a sad look on his face, looking and waiting for his son to come back . . .

***Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So [Jesus] told them this parable.***

Jesus tells them this parable, that they then - and we today - might understand that the love and forgiveness of our Father in heaven is not because of our faithfulness or our works or how good we are. The younger son couldn't lose it or earn it back by what he did, and the older son couldn't lose it or keep it by what he did. Our Father's love is all gift, all grace, all the time.

The Pharisees and the scribes - who prompted this parable - weren't bad guys; they just misunderstood, as we sometimes do, that God's love cannot be earned, and that His grace is never deserved. You don't have to make promises or shape yourself up or prove you deserve another chance. Just repent. Just come back to receive His love and forgiveness, for He is here, *ready to bowl you over with His love!* And to restore you as His son.

And so maybe you are like the younger son and have misused your life and the gifts that have been given you. Or maybe you are more like the older son, the one who was outwardly faithful, yet in his heart lived a lot of anger and resentment and pride. Whatever you have been, and whoever you are now, there is a feast waiting for you. And not just any feast, but the best of the best! No fatted calf - but the Body and Blood of Jesus are here for you. And no better feast could there be than this, than to receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation of the Son who laid down His life for us sinners, that we sinners could be sons of God.

That is how we know that our Father wants us back; that our Father is waiting for us; that He is ready to bowl us over with His love - because Jesus showed us that love on the cross, where, as St. Paul told us today, ***He became our sin offering, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*** Or in other words, that in Him, we prodigal sons might be welcomed back as forgiven sons, because of our Saviour's prodigal love for us. But is that love the Father's love? It is indeed. For

Jesus said: *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father* (John 14:9).

That love is why the younger son returned. Beat up, chewed up, and spit out by the world, he returns with his tail between his legs - not to punishment - but to love, prodigal love, lavish love, a greater love than he ever could have expected or even hoped for.

That love is why the father wants his older son to return. That his heart, so cold and hard with self-interest, self-satisfaction, and self-righteousness, might be melted by the love, the prodigal love, the lavish love of the Father. A love that son doesn't really know, but that his father wants to give.

And that love is why the father wants you to return. That returning each week and confessing: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son*, He bowls us over with His love and says: *I forgive you all your sins. Come to the feast! I have prepared it just for you. I am so happy you are here. You're home!*

Yes, we are home. Home again, in the house of our Father.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.