

21 March 2004  
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Overwhelming Love”

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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

Every year my church up in New York would hold a tag sale. It was a big, outdoor event which lasted most of the day, and it was very busy and hectic. People were constantly coming and going, asking questions, needing something. And in such a frenzied environment it's hard to keep track of everything . . . including, one time, my son. At one point, during one of those sales, I couldn't find Robbie. I found Laurie, expecting Robbie to be with her, but she thought Robbie was with me. And at that moment, when you realize your child is lost, fear sets in, your heart starts pounding through your chest, and nothing else matters – you drop everything and search until you find your child. . . . Now, as you can see, it turned out okay! He was with one of the ladies from the church, helping her clean the church. But I will never forget the terror of that moment, or the joy and relief in finding him.

That is the same joy and relief that the father of the prodigal son felt in the parable we heard today. He had “lost” his son. One day his son came up to him and demanded his share of the inheritance – which is the same as wishing that his father was dead, and saying it to his face! The son then sold it all, and left. He didn't tell his father where he was going, he just left . . . and the father probably wondered if he would ever see his son again. And no matter how bad their relationship evidently was, the father was heartbroken.

And so, it seems, everyday, he was looking for his son. Everyday he would look out his window, look past everything else in the village, and look far down the road for his son. Nothing else really mattered, only the thought: would this be the day?

Until one day, it happened! There was his son, coming down the road! And at that moment, seeing his son, nothing else mattered to the father! He runs down the stairs of his house, out the door, through the roads of the village, and grabs his son! He hugs him and kisses him and there were probably tears of joy streaming down his face. He doesn't care what happened to the inheritance; he doesn't care about the insult he had received;

nothing else mattered! Only that he found his son again!

And so he doesn't care that he would be seen with his robes hiked up and running through the village – which would be considered dishonorable and shameful for the master of the house. He doesn't care what the rest of the village thinks about his love for his “prodigal” son. He doesn't even care about the fact that his son has wasted all the inheritance and comes back barefoot and in rags! It was like that day for me at the tag sale – I didn't care what other people thought of me as I was looking for Robbie. I didn't care if somebody took off with the money or some of the things that were being sold. I didn't care if they thought I was a bad father for losing track of my son. Only one thing mattered: the joy of finding your child who was lost.

And that, my friends, is a picture of your Saviour. God, in Jesus Christ, come to find you – his sons and daughters. God, in Christ, reconciling us and not counting our sins against us. (2 Cor 5:19) God, in Christ Jesus, come to seek and save the lost. (Lk 19:10) For while we were still sinners, Christ came for us. (Rom 5:8) While we were still a long way off, God came down from heaven to find us, to rescue us, to give Himself for us. He allows Himself to be publicly shamed and mistreated and hung on a cross as a criminal. Costly love! But He doesn't care. He can't not do this! And He doesn't hide His love – no, like the father running through the village, He wants everyone to see it! And He wants everyone to know it. And then when He finds us, He celebrates! But not alone – the father in the parable throws a great banquet. Jesus celebrates with those He finds. The angels of God rejoice in heaven over one sinner who repents. And it can be no other way! Such is the love of your Heavenly Father for you.

And He accepts us back only on His terms. Did you notice that? In the parable, the prodigal son thinks he has it all figured out. After he wastes all of his inheritance, he'll think he'll fix it by getting a job. When that doesn't work (and he runs out of other options), he decides to go back to his father – but with a plan! To make up for what he did. To restore the family name and the family honor. And so he decides to go back and ask his father not to take him back, but to get him a job as a craftsman. That way he can earn a living and at the same time save enough money to settle his account with his father, and pay him back. And so he goes back with that in mind. *He will make himself worthy.*

And so many times that is what we think. That somehow we will make ourselves worthy of God's forgiveness. I will try harder, I will repent more, I will re-dedicate myself, I will . . . But you can't fix a broken heart like a broken window. A new sheet of glass and the broken window is a thing of the past. Not so a broken heart. . . . And so the father doesn't accept us back on our terms, or according to our plan – as if we can fix or solve

our sin and the mess we have made! To think that only cheapens the reality of the pain that we have caused by our sin. No, He will accept us only on His terms.

So what, then, are His terms? Simply this: that we receive His unconditional love and forgiveness, and that we accept being found. That we stop trying to make ourselves worthy and accept our Father's love for us. . . . That's what happened in the parable. The father acts first. The father throws his arms around his son and hugs and kisses him. The father shows his love and joy and forgiveness – and in response, the son is changed. He knows that he can no longer offer to make amends, to make himself worthy. He sees that the problem is not the money, but his father's broken heart. And no amount of effort on his part can fix that. He can only receive his father's love, and accept being found. He is humbled in the face of such overwhelming grace. And when the father sees that his love and grace has been received, the celebration begins! He orders his son restored. He doesn't want anyone to see him in rags, but in riches. Killing a fatted calf would feed over 200 people – such is the joy of the father! He wants everyone to celebrate with him. He has found his son!

And so Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. He rejoices in finding them. He has to rejoice! This is why He came down from heaven – to find and embrace his lost sons and daughters and overwhelm them with His love. And when they repent and receive His love and forgiveness, *He celebrates*. . . . But because of this very fact, this foolish love, this foolish self-sacrifice, this “foolishness of the cross” (Epistle: 1 Cor 1), the Pharisees and Scribes are grumbling against Him. They are the older brother – grumbling at the father's love; grumbling at the celebration.

But the father doesn't get angry at the older son, but wants him to understand that his love and grace is for him too. For notice, the older son **has the same problem** the younger son did – thinking of his relationship with his father in terms of service and work and worthiness. He tells his father, “*Look, these many years I have served you . . .*” But the father won't accept such talk. He will not accept his younger son or his older son on the basis of their service or work or worthiness – no, they are his sons! They will always be his sons! And he wants them only to accept his love! And to celebrate his love!

And so too for you and me. You may consider yourself a prodigal son, having sinned greatly and wasted much and wanting to make yourself worthy of God's love again. Or you may consider yourself like the older son, having been in the church all your life, and worthy of God's love for having served Him so faithfully. *But your Heavenly Father will have none of that kind of talk!* He does not love or forgive or accept you on the basis of anything you have done, or that you promise to do in the future. He simply wants to overwhelm you with His love, that in repentance you give up everything you think you

can do for Him, and simply receive His love and grace and forgiveness. That you accept being found.

And that is the focus of this Lenten season. That God, in Christ, came for us. He left His throne in Heaven to come for you. He came and gave up everything for you, even to the shame of hanging on the cross. Not because you are worthy, because you are not. And not so that you would become His slave or His servant, but to find His sons and daughters. And He has found you. There is nothing that you can do to make yourself worthy. He asks only that in repentance, you receive His love and forgiveness, and that you come and eat at His banquet table. For you were dead, but are now alive. You were lost, but now you have been found.

“Father of all,  
we give you thanks and praise,  
that when we were still far off  
you met us in your Son  
and brought us home.  
Dying and living,  
He declared your love,  
gave us grace,  
and opened the gate of glory.”

(from: *Finding the Lost Cultural Keys to Luke 15*. Kenneth Bailey [St. Louis: Concordia 1992] 192-193.)

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.