

10 March 2013  
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“An Old Parable a New Way”

Text: Luke 15:1-3a, 11-32; Isaiah 12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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

Jesus just doesn't get it. He's giving God a bad name! We know that He is a prophet of some sort or another; He knows God's Word and speaks with authority. We haven't been able to trip Him up with any of our questions about the Law. So He really ought to know better. Yes, the tax collectors and sinners need to be taught, we'll give Him that. We've been trying to do that ourselves for the longest time. But to receive them like there's nothing wrong with them and eat with them? What about the *holiness* of the church? What about *righteousness*? What about *standards*? We want to help those people as much as He does, but He's not helping them with what He's doing. And He's certainly not helping God's cause. What will the Romans think? What will those who worship other gods think? Will they really want to be part of a church filled with those kinds of people?

Look, I know His heart's in the right place. It really is. He wants to help them. So we need to help Him. Get Him back on the right track. Help Him understand the way things are in this world. He's just a bit naive, this Jesus. He's not very practical. We know how people are - what you *can* do and *can't* do with them. They're just going to take advantage of you. We just have to help Him understand that He needs to dial it back a little. Tone it down. Don't just receive them and eat with them as if they're just as good as we are.

So sit down, Jesus. Let us help you.

What's that? A parable? OK. He is a good story teller. ***A man has two sons . . .***

Oh, I think we've heard this one before! The Scriptures are filled with stories like this. Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob. Two sons, and God usually chooses the younger. He doesn't give favor to someone just because they're the firstborn. He does things differently. Even when there are more than two sons - like with Joseph and King David. ***A man has two sons . . .*** Yeah, we know where this story is going. He's going to favor the younger son. He going to choose the younger son. The younger son is going to be the one . . .

Oh wait. That's strange. The younger son does *what*? He insults his father like that? Taking his inheritance, wishing him dead, leaving . . . and then sinning like that? And then a famine comes, an economic downturn, huh? And pigs? Hmph. Serves him right. What goes around comes around. You get what you deserve. He made his bed, now he has to sleep in it. Karma. Hey, I hope the tax collectors and sinners are listening to this!

What's that, Timaeus? *What* are you thinking about? You think he's talking about us? That *we're* the younger son? Well I know that's how the stories in the Scriptures *usually* go, but *obviously* not here! . . . What? The word *inheritance*? Well yes, we've received an inheritance! To Israel *belongs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To us belong the patriarchs, and from our race will come the Messiah!* Yes that is true! (Romans 9:4-5) . . . You think He means that we're the ones who have wasted our inheritance? That we're unfaithful? That we've left our Father? *I'm no pig farmer!* We haven't wasted our inheritance! Look at the Temple, the sacrifices, we've even now set up the Temple Bank to exchange money for the pilgrims, sell them the animals they need, and yes, make a little money on the side! We're God's chosen people! Look, Timaeus, we're here to help Him, to teach Him, to help Him understand . . . Relax. Let's hear what comes next.

***But when he came to himself . . .*** Well *that's* good! There's hope for him. . . . Um hm, um hm. . . . See, I told you that's not us. We've nothing to repent of! . . . ***Treat me as one of your hired servants.*** Good! Good Jesus! That's exactly right. He's got to earn his way back. And you can be sure the father will garnish a percentage of those wages till he gets paid back, right Timaeus! *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me!* Well, that ain't gonna happen! The father's wise to him now.

*Oh, Jesus! There you go again.* Just when I thought you were on the right track, you start goin' all compassion and love on us! *No one's going to believe this story!* What father would embrace and kiss such a son, still covered with pig filth. And then the best robe and shoes? *Lipstick on a pig!* And the family signet ring and a party for him? Yeah. You see, this is why Jesus needs us. He really thinks God is like that. That He'll just forgive, just like that! . . . Yeah, Timaeus, I know that's why Jesus receives these folks and eats with them. He thinks He's bein' all *Godlike*. That'd be funny *if it weren't so dangerous*. We have to help Him, or we're just going to have to . . . well, like Caiaphas said: *It's better that one man should die than that the whole nation perish* (John 18:14).

Oh, the story's not over. There's more. *Can't wait to hear this part.* . . . Oh, the *older* son; yes . . . um hm, um hm. Well he should be upset! . . . Yes, Timaeus, I suppose you're right. The tables are reversed now. Before, the older son was home

and the younger son was outside, but now the younger son is home and the older son is outside. They both despised their father, just in different ways. The older son didn't want to be like his father . . . What? You think Jesus is talking about us again? That we don't want to be like our Father in heaven by not forgiving? Like HIS Father, maybe! But that's not *our* father; that's not *our* God. *Our* God demands sacrifice, He demands holiness, He demands righteousness. That's what we do. That's what we teach. The older son's got it right. So, yeah, I guess we are the older son. Better than being that *younger* son!

Well, yes Timaeus. The younger son wound up *in* the father's house and the older son *outside*. But the father said to the older son: ***all that is mine is yours.***

What? You think the older son was putting that in jeopardy by despising his father and not going back in? Interesting theory . . . *Oh, stop it, Timaeus!* Have His teachings infected you too?

Why, yes, I remember the reading from the prophet we heard last Sabbath in the synagogue. Of course I remember! I'm a Pharisee! *We don't forget like you Scribes!* . . . Oh, relax, I'm just kidding. But it is, in fact, a chapter I long ago learned by heart. Isaiah chapter 12:

***You will say in that day:***

***"I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me.***

***"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has . . . become . . . my salvation."***

OK. I admit, you're right. It *does* sound like something the younger son would say, like what happened to him. And yes, Joseph did forgive his brothers, didn't he? And King David, too, forgave his son Absalom for his rebellion. But . . . *So why won't we forgive?* Timaeus! Because they're tax collectors and sinners! They're adulterers and abortionists! They're homosexuals and murderers! They're rapists and child molesters! They're liars, cheaters, thieves . . .

Yes, King David and Bathsheba. I know the story. Lust, adultery, murder, lying. David was all that . . . and his prayer . . . we just sang it earlier, yes . . . and yes, it does sound like the younger son again, doesn't it?

***Have mercy on me, O [Father], according to your steadfast love;***

***according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.***

***Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!***

***For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.***

***Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.  
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.  
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.***

Timaeus . . . *what are you saying?* King David was both the younger son and the older son? He needed to repent, yes, and he was forgiven, yes. And then he forgave, true that. So us too? *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?*

But Timaeus . . . what about sacrifice? There's got to be sacrifice! Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness! Forgiveness just like that is too easy! It can't be . . . He wouldn't . . . Well, yes, of course. The lambs. The lambs of God in the Temple. You heard John the Baptist call Him what? *The Lamb of God* (John 1:29)?

Timaeus, stop! No, I know you're right. Everything you've said is right. God's church has always been filled with sinners. Starting with Adam. And me. You're right, Timaeus. Oh, you're right! The other day when I lusted after my neighbor Barnabas' wife, then I wished he were dead so I could have her, when I lied to him about stealing some of his figs, when I refused to forgive my wife for burning the dinner, then I mad at God for giving me such a wife, when I delighted that the merchant forgot to charge me for everything I bought the other day and I didn't say anything, when I gossiped and spread those rumors about Joseph, when I berated others for missing church but then my mind wandered so much the other day its as if I wasn't there at all, when I . . . oh, what's the use, Timaeus! I could keep you here all day! I am the younger son, I am the older son! What a miserable, wretched man I am!

Timaeus, is this why you brought me here today? You knew, didn't you? That I . . . that He . . . *Why are you smiling?!*

***It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.***

***For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

So come now, all you sinners, dressed in the robe of Christ's perfect righteousness in Holy Baptism. Your Father is happy you're here and the feast is ready **for you**. Not the fattened calf, but *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*.

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