

31 March 2019  
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Rebels Welcomed Here”

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

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

I heard you just sing: *As Rebels, Lord, Who Foolishly Have Wandered* (LSB #612). You too, huh? As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever, I guess.

But I'll never forget that day when I saw it in spades. The rebel of rebels. If it had happened to anyone else, I might not have cared or even known. But it happened to my master, and there was no master kinder, gentler, more compassionate, more generous, or more fair than he. I count myself lucky to be one of his hired servants. He cared for us just like we were family. We knew our place and didn't take advantage. But he always went out of his way to make sure we had enough, were taken care of, and had all we needed.

Until one day my master announced he was selling one-third of the estate. I couldn't believe it - that's such a huge chunk of what he owned! Something must have happened to cause it, something bad, but no one knew. Well, not many days later, we saw our master's younger son leaving. He was moving out. The rumor was that he had a falling out with his father and was going to another country, striking out on his own. Very unusual. So much was changing, and we didn't know why.

The master called us together and confirmed what had happened . . . sort of. He didn't tell us exactly what had happened, but we could put two and two together. One-third of the estate was the younger son's inheritance. He must have demanded it from his father. The nerve! To spit in your father's face like that and wish he was dead. And then leave. That's why I called him the rebel of rebels. How could he do that to such a kind and generous man? Didn't he know how good he had it? I guess not. And just to let you know how kind and generous my master is, even though he sold one-third of the estate, he told us that none of us would be let go. He would keep all of us hired servants on. I told you - just like family.

Well, we were so mad! How could his son do that? We hurt for the old man, knowing how deeply this must have hurt him. And one thing's for sure - if that son ever set foot back on this property again, we would let him know what we thought! If he ever had the nerve to walk back down that road, he'd get the same respect from us that he gave to his

father! He'd be the one spit on! He'd be the one hurt next time. Count on it.

Well, some time went by, and life goes on. Our anger died down a bit, but our hatred didn't! Every time I thought of that rascal . . . But it was the old man I was worried about. It seemed like he aged a year for every week that went by. He wasn't getting over this. It was weighing heavy on him. I wonder if he heard the same reports that we were hearing, about how his son was making quite a name for himself - and not a good one! Of course he was. The old man probably knew more than we did. That's why he looked as he did. He still checked in with us every day, to see how we were doing. But he wasn't the same. He didn't have the same life and joy in him. Every day, he'd walk slowly down the lane and look out the gate and return, each day sadder than the one before . . .

And then it happened. The boy returned. I tell you, wild fires don't spread as fast as that news did! So we all got ready. We, all of us hired servants, we lined the road from the gate of the estate to the house, and we were going to let him have it! Jeers, names, harsh words, spitting . . . I even heard of a couple servants who wanted to throw stones at him. Well, he'd know he wasn't welcome back here, *if* he even made it all the way down the lane.

So we were getting in position but then . . . well, I couldn't believe my eyes. The old man was running down the lane - sprinting! - toward the gate. I hadn't seen him move so fast in years. Most of us thought when this son returned - *if* he ever did - he'd have to beg to even see his father. But the old man was running down the lane in front of us all. At first I thought he wanted to hurl the first angry word or spitball at the rebel, his *former* son . . . but when he ran past me, I wasn't sure . . . but I thought he looked happy . . . joyful, even . . . like his life was back again.

Well, after I picked my jaw up off the ground, my suspicion was confirmed. No sooner had the gate opened than our father lunged at his son and was hugging him and kissing him! That went on for a little bit, and then they began walking down the lane past all us hired servants who were there to let that rebel have it - but with the father's arm around his son, how could we? In fact, the father's actions changed everything. Now, we stood there as if like an honor guard, welcoming the son home! That's not why we were there or what we intended . . . but the old man, it's what he did.

When they got to where I was standing, my master looked at me and the man next to me and said: ***Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.*** We were frozen. Did we hear right? Did he really just tell us to . . . And then he said: *C'mon! Hop to it! Go!* So we did.

And I tell you - my admiration for the old man grew by leaps and bounds that day. I knew

he was kind and gentle and compassionate and generous *before*, but this! This was a whole different ball game! This was way more than I thought humanly possible! And I was ashamed, too, of what we, I, had planned to do. Not love but hate. Not forgive but retaliate. Not kindness but shaming. But I learned something that day, from my master. About love and forgiveness. That I needed it, too. I was a rebel, too. In my heart.

So I went to the younger son later that day, just before the party was to start, to confess to him. And he told me what he had said to his father, that he had *sinned against heaven and before you*, and that *I am no longer worthy to be called your son*. I was happy to hear him say those words. But then he said this, too, that he had planned on asking to be brought back not as a son but as one of us, as a hired servant. That way he could start paying his father back, he wouldn't have to live off what was now his brother's estate, and he could save face a little bit. But after what his father did . . . he couldn't say those words. Because before he could, the father had given it all back to him - his place in the family, his honor, his life. He was overwhelmed by his father's love and forgiveness and acceptance.

All I could do is smile and nod. The old man, he was something special. And I thought to myself, I want to be a father like that, a master like that, a friend like that.

So the party got started. All of us hired servants were working, but we were guests at the same time. Just like family, as the master always treated us. I was in charge of the wine, so I went out to refill one of the jugs. And while I was out there the older son called out to me. He was still in his work clothes. I hadn't even noticed that he wasn't at the party. He came up to me and asked what was going on, what the party was all about. So I told him. *Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound*. He started shaking and turning red - I thought he was going to blow a gasket! I was fearful just looking at him. But it made sense, I guess. As angry as all of us hired servants had been, the brother must have been, too. And he said: *I ain't going in there, to celebrate that filthy rat! He deserves nothing! Should've died with those pigs he was feeding. No, that would be unfair to the pigs!*

And just as I knew I had been a rebel like the younger son, I knew I had rebellious times like this older son, too. I was no better.

Just then the father came out. He said "thank you" to me, which I knew meant it was time for me to leave them alone. So I picked up the jug I was refilling . . . but I confess, I stayed within earshot. I wanted to hear what the father was going to say. And he didn't disappoint. The older son was so angry! *Your son, not my brother . . . Not fair . . . prostitutes . . .* But the father was so kind and loving, just as he had been to the younger son. And I heard him say: *Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.*

I went back in to the party at that point. And I saw the father come in soon after me. But the older son, he stayed outside. And honestly, I can't remember if he ever came in at all. I felt badly for him. Not because of what his brother had done, but because of what he couldn't do. He couldn't accept his father's kindness and love.

*As Rebels, Lord, Who Foolishly Have Wandered.* The older son, too, was a rebel. And how far he had wandered from his father, even though he never left the estate.

And you know, that's the thing I realized, as I thought about all this later that night, lying in bed. We were all rebels. We were all foolish. The younger son. Me and my fellow hired servants. The older son. Maybe you, too? We were all different, yet all the same. But my master, their father, he never changed. He was just as kind before and after. He was ready and constant with his love and forgiveness. He would rather be shamed himself than see us shamed. Even though we weren't family, he treated us as family. Even when his sons didn't act as family, he always treated them that way. And I fell asleep with more peace in my heart than I think I ever had before.

The next day was a Sabbath. My master always made sure we took the Sabbath off. I went to the synagogue with my family. There was a visiting rabbi there that day, as there sometimes was. And one of the readings for that day was from Psalm 51 - you sang it this morning as well.

***Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.***

Right? I am always amazed at how the Word of God seems to speak to what I am going through in my life. ***Abundant***, amazing ***mercy***. ***Blot out my transgressions***. That's what the father had done. That's what our Father in heaven does. For, this rabbi went on to say, that He doesn't just *treat* us as family, but brings us into His family. And He doesn't just hold feasts for others but has a feast for us. And He puts His robe of righteousness on us. And that one day is coming a feast that will never end.

And I thought about that line from the hymn again: *As Rebels, Lord, Who Foolishly Have Wandered*. And yet all the Lord has done for me . . .

Well, I confess, my mind wandered a bit. But the rabbi brought me back, because He then said the most amazing thing. He said that the mercy of our Father is even greater than we imagine. And I thought back to the beginning of this story and how I knew that my master was merciful, but how he still had surprised me. And I thought - *what could be greater than that?* How could I be more surprised than that? And then He said it . . . and I was more amazed . . . and my jaw dropped. He said, Our Father, to make us family, to bring us back, to forgive us, to feed us, us foolish rebels, He was going to sacrifice His

only Son. And it was going to happen soon.

You could've heard a pin drop.

*For our sake* - for the sake of us rebels - *[the Father] made [His Son] who knew no sin*, who had done no wrong, *to be sin for us* - to bear our sin and rebellion for us; *so that in Him*, because of Him, *we might become the righteousness of God*. Really? He said it was true. And He said more, too. It made my head spin. He spoke of atonement, resurrection, Body and Blood, eternal life . . .

And I believed Him. There was something about Him. He taught differently than the others. His words had authority.

I could feel the warm tears dripping down my cheek. A love greater than my master's? A love this great? Could it be? Would God do this for me? For you? Make us sons? Treat us rebels . . . like this? Some even said He was that Son!

I wanted to ask this visiting rabbi more about this after the service was over, but he slipped away before I could ask him.

But I did hear His name. It was Jesus.

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.