



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

## **“Home for the First Time”**

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

Rev. David K. Groth

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 10, 2013

## **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment. You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

We know this story well, and we listen to it as an interesting story from antiquity that has nothing to do with us. But in fact it has everything to do with us. When we look at this odd and fascinating fellow, this prodigal son, we're looking at our own portraits.

Let's get into it. The old man gets on the young man's nerves. "Don't do this." "Don't do that." He's always jerking the leash and whistling a fellow back.

The Father, of course, has a different perspective about the rules. He doesn't forbid anything just to play God. No, he knows his children need guidance. They *need* boundaries. They flourish when there are firm rules and high expectations. He has seen how children turn out who don't have boundaries or expectations placed on them. He has seen what unbearable brats they can turn out to be – not only unbearable to others but a burden to themselves as well, sick of themselves and at odds with themselves, utterly unhappy.

Surely this was an on-going conversation between the father and the son. I picture the son saying, "Dad, I want to move out. I cannot go on listening to this everlasting, 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not.' I'm a grown man now who deserves his freedom." The Father replies, "Do you really think you have no freedom? This house and everything in it belongs to you. You can tell me anything and everything that troubles you. Look, my whole kingdom belongs to you. I love you and I give you daily bread, I forgive your sins. You are slave of no one. You are accountable only to me, and I'm no slave master. The work I give you is reasonable and you can come and go as you please. You already are free."

The hot-headed son will have none of it. "I don't give a hoot about all that" he says. "I can't stand this constant

training. For me freedom means to be able to do what I want to do.” And the Father replies, “And for me, freedom means that you should become what you ought to be, and not a slave to your own passions, a slave to your own ambitions, or your own need for recognition. That’s why there are boundaries. You have a full inventory of desires, and they would easily enslave you. I’m not trying to limit your freedom. Just the opposite. I love you, and it is this love that is behind the “Thou shalt” and the “Thou shalt nots.”

But the son has other plans. His passions are all churned up, and there’s a whole world out there to experience. His greatest fear is that he’s missing something. “I’ll come back” he says, “but I need a break from all this, some different scenery, different people, different experiences, and then, I promise, I’ll come back eventually, and I’ll be good again.”

Haven’t we all felt this at one time or another? Haven’t we all felt the impulse to just escape from the hum drum, disciplined, normality of Watertown and go out and live it up a little? Get in your car and just go . . . Vegas maybe . . . or better yet, O’Hare and fly to a place where you can be who you want to be. Don’t you see yourself in the prodigal?

Again, the son appears in his father’s office, and resolutely announces, “I’m leaving, and I cannot wait for you to die. Pay me my inheritance now.” No one is more astonished than the son when the father, without saying a word, goes to the safe, gets the money and gives the boy his inheritance. He does not force his son to stay home. He forces no one. Remember, he did not force Adam and Eve to refrain from plucking the forbidden fruit. The Father does not treat us like objects, but rather as persons made in his own image. He gives us the freedom to leave.

For his part, the son is finally happy and light-hearted. He wastes no time. He throws a few things into a sack and nearly dances down the lane. He’s not sure where he’s going. He’s only knows it will be a long ways away from here.

Wordless, the father watches his son walk away. He knows he will wait for him. He will watch for him. He will not stop thinking about his son. And he knows his words will go with the son. His voice will be in his son's heart and mind wherever he goes.

So now the son can finally do what he wants. And he does. Our translation delicately calls it "reckless living." The King James Version called it "riotous living." Whatever it is, it's a long and voluptuous holiday out there in the far country. Maybe he starts by renting a fine apartment, a bachelor pad on a high ridge with a great view of the city below. He invests in a new wardrobe. Maybe he throws a big, lavish open house for his neighbors, to meet some new people and make new friends. And it works. He's making an impression on the world. And there are no more "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not."

However, he is slightly troubled when he thinks that everything he has ultimately comes from his father. His possessions, for sure, the house, the furnishings, the fine artwork, his wardrobe, the food and drink . . . it's all his father's money. His body too, which he dresses up and uses, which his new girlfriend loves – it too came from his father. These possessions are not inherently evil; otherwise the father would not have given them to him. But the way he uses them, there's something wrong there. He uses them all for himself, and *without* the father's blessing. That troubles him a little, but he tries not to think about it. He is also slightly troubled to notice that everything seems to run through his fingers. He's spending down the inheritance faster than he thought he would.

With time, things change. His new friends are great, and important to him, but sometimes he senses their love would soon cool if he were forced to trim his spending. And all that new stuff he bought . . . it has lost some of its luster. It doesn't delight him anymore. Even that fantastic view from his apartment . . . often he doesn't really see it anymore. Even his body has lost some of its vitality and has grown a little soft. All that drinking and carousing late into the night has taken a toll on him. Moreover, he's having to

try harder and spend more to get any new thrills, and somehow his life seems a little hollow and aimless.

Every age has its' own peculiar "far country" and so does ours. Every individual has his/her own "far country" and so do you. But everything we would take with us to the far country still comes from the Father. And when we use those things just for ourselves and without his blessing, they have a way of decaying in our hands.

One example: what are your plans for retirement? Maybe one or two of you is thinking right now about the daily round of golf or bridge, or maybe fishing following by sheephead and a few cold ones and brats on the grill. At first, it's fantastic. But, with time, those pleasures grow hollow. You've told all your stories to all your buddies once or twice, and you've heard all the stories your buddies have to tell at least once or twice or thrice. And no new stories are being generated because you're not really living anymore. You're not working or serving. You have no direction. You're carrying around with you a few decayed Christian ideas, but soon, you discover you have no real purpose. If you think disengaging from work and service is what retirement is about, you are setting yourself up for a meaningless and miserable existence.

The more unhappy the prodigal feels, the more he throws himself into his passions. He's burning through the inheritance now, and there's one girlfriend after another, and he notices the quality of the girlfriends he's able to attract is starting to decline . . . a little too much makeup and perfume, a little too loud, a little flirtatious with his friends. But he finds he cannot be alone any longer; he must have something going on around him. And it's beginning to dawn on him that there's not as much freedom out there in the far country as he thought there would be. First, he's still hearing his father's voice, the "thou shalt" and the "thou shalt nots", and there's a mysterious pull there, a surprising tug at the heart. Moreover, just as his father said he would, he has become enslaved by his own desires, and by his grand style of living and the expectations of his friends, and it's becoming harder to pay for it all.

That's what freedom looks like outside the Father's house . . . it's just a different set of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt

nots.” The prodigal son hears the rattle of invisible chains, but there’s no one to help him and nobody really knows him. Only the distant father, who watched him go away. He knows. He understands.

Then, disaster strikes. There’s famine in the land. The market tanks. He loses everything . . . his fine house, his artwork, his furnishings. His friends are nowhere to be seen; they have enough trouble of their own without adding his burdens to their plate. His girlfriend has taken flight. “It’s you” she says, “not me. You’re not very cool after all.” He has nothing, and though he can hardly believe it, he doesn’t even have food. What now? The only thing he can think of is to hire himself out, and the only work he can find is that of slopping hogs. Imagine, this fellow who was never really accountable to anyone except his loving father . . . well now he is subject to this hard-driving, crusty old farmer who cares nothing for him. When the lad groans and whines, the farmer simply says, “If you don’t want to do work, just let me know. There are fifty others in town who gladly will.”

For the first time really, the young man begins to realize what it means to be outside of his father’s household. That was freedom, back there with his loving father and in his father’s house. That was freedom, and he walked away from it.

You and I have either one master or another. We are either subject to God, and then we are in the Father’s house, possessing the freedom of the children of God, sons and not slaves, with blessings no money can buy. Or, we serve our own urges and other men, and are subject to our fears, and are limited by our resources. There is no neutral ground between the two masters. We are either the child of the one or the slave of the other. God or Mammon.

Out there slopping hogs, the son grows disgusted with the hogs and with himself. He can still picture his father’s house, but he knows he can make no claims on it. He has forfeited his rights to sonship and already spent his inheritance.

At the same time, he remembers his father’s face as he left, and the sadness, and he knows, he just knows the father

is waiting for him. He knows his father would welcome him back. And that's called repentance.

Repentance is not simply something that is negative. It is not merely self-disgust. It is above all a kind of homesickness; not just turning away from something, but turning back to something, turning back to the Father. Whenever the New Testament speaks of repentance, there's always this sparkling joy in the background, this homecoming. It does not say, "Repent or hell will swallow you up." It says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

And notice, it's really the father's influence from afar that enables the young man to turn back. He knows the father is waiting and watching for him. He knows he's still loved. It is also the Father's love that fuels our repentance, a love that even rejoices over the sinner who repents. Between the lines of this parable, can you hear Jesus shouting out the Good News: "You can come home. I still love you. Come home!"?

And when we do, the Father is thrilled to welcome us and reinstate us as his children. The Father embraces and kisses us prodigals, and gives us gifts, and orders the preparation of a feast, the best food he can give, and the invisible chains fall clattering to the ground. Remember what Jesus said? "There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7).

So the story isn't so much about our faithlessness, as it is about the faithfulness of God who waits and watches for us to return and cannot restrain his joy when we do. Amen.

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