

Jesus often told parables. Perhaps you will remember your catechism days when you learned that a parable was *an earthly story with a heavenly meaning*. The parable we are about to look at today and next week has been called everything from “*The pearl and crown of all the parables*” to “*the gospel within the gospel*.” It is near and dear to many a heart. It has been immortalized in the pages of scriptures and parts of it have been set to music in such hymns as *Amazing Grace*. And for most of us, it is indelibly etched in our minds as the parable of *The Prodigal Son*.

It begins with a very simple, straight-forward statement, “***A certain man had two sons.***” Immediately our Savior informs us that this earthly story is going to be about the relationship between three people, a father and his two sons. Though the title would draw our attention to the younger, the “prodigal” or “wasteful” son, really, what we’re dealing with here is a parable of lost *sons*. Or perhaps even more to the heart, I would suggest to you that this parable is not ultimately about the sons at all. It is, rather, about *the father*, about a loving father. And so, over the next two weeks, Jesus invites us to *Behold the Father’s Love*. This week Jesus invites us to *Behold the Father’s Love...for those lost in sin*. And as we do so, please...

Again... “***A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.***” (3,11-12). According to Jewish custom the older son would inherit all the family land and most of his father’s wealth. The younger son would get the monetary equivalent of one-third of the estate. A parent could then, as now, divide his or her property while living and still maintain control over it. However, this

request was rare and could only be taken in one way—the son was impatient for his father’s death and wanted to be free of his father’s control.

The bottom line is that we see in this impatient son a selfishness and an irresponsibility that inflicts brokenness and hurt on his father. There are signs that things are not good between – as if there are things they have never worked out, never resolved, and now they are coming to a head and to something of a horrible conclusion. With this slap in the face, the son’s relationship with his father is shattered. And, while the son’s action does not technically break the law, it clearly breaks his father’s heart.

So what does the father do? Does he burst into a furious tirade at his son’s rebellion? Does he take immediate legal action to protect his own possessions and legally disown his son? No. The father does what no father would ever do in the ancient Middle East. *He grants the request*. We’re told that ***he divided his property between them***. And as he does so, he suffers. With his heart breaking in two, he lovingly holds out a severed end of a rope to his son and forfeits all ties with him.

Not surprisingly, and ***not many days later, the younger son gathered together all that he had***. That’s a colloquial expression that means he cashes everything in. Then he ***traveled to a distant country. There he wasted his wealth with reckless living***. In a presumably short period of time, he wasted what it had taken his father a lifetime to earn. He blew everything! But to make matters worse, when he had spent his entire inheritance, a famine struck and left him in an even more desperate situation. So desperate that ***he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs***.

To God’s Old Testament people, pigs were as unclean as you could get. In fact, there was a saying among the Jews of the day, *May a curse come upon the man who cares for swine*. (Hendriksen) This is

how low the young man had sunk: risking a curse, risking hell itself, just to be able to earn enough to eat. But even there he came up short. Jesus tells us that ***he would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*** Carob pods contain slightly sweet beans that are often ground to powder and used as a cocoa substitute. We're not talking the beans, here. We're talking about the leftover husks that the son was longing to eat. Yet the point is not that he was eating. The point is that even the pigs were better off than he was! He had hit rock bottom.

And with the gnawing of an empty stomach ***he finally came to his senses and said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."*** (17-18).

Notice the order: ***"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you."*** He realized that he was lost in sin. He hadn't just hurt his father. He had offended his God. But notice the distance he still plans to maintain. ***"I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."*** (19-20a). He doesn't want to be back under his father's roof. He wants to be a hired laborer who would typically live in the village, NOT on the estate. He doesn't throw himself at the mercy of his father to the point that he asks to be made his son again. Notice how he wants to still get from his father, but earn it on his own as one of his father's ***hired servants***. He had lost his status as a son, he had sunk to being lowlier than the lowest slave. And with his pride in his hands, he headed home to face his father.

But now, ***Behold the Father's love: While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.*** In the Middle East there would have been certain expectations of a

father's behavior in circumstances like these. His son in disgrace, the father would be expected remain aloof, subdued, inside the house. A servant or family member would perhaps play mediator to see if there would be any way that the father might condescend to stand up and go greet his son or maybe invite his son into his study. The father would then sit solemnly behind his desk and wait for the son's speech of sorrow. This way the father's honor and dignity would be preserved.

But not this father. He hadn't spent his time sitting at his desk erasing his son's name from the will. He wasn't plotting on how to preserve his honor and dignity. Quite the opposite! We get the distinct impression that the father had made it a consistent habit of checking the horizon, looking out the window every day at every opportunity, peering down the driveway, longing to see his wayward son. And when he sees him, the father didn't stand out on the porch with hands on his hips expecting his son to grovel in gravel. He didn't wait for the son to come to him. ***Behold the father's love!*** Jesus tells us that when the Father saw his son ***He felt compassion*** for him. That's a very strong emotion. Translated into English the Greek word for compassion literally means that he was so moved that his intestines felt all cut up.

Throwing all sense of honor and dignity out the window, aching with love for his lost son, he hiked up his robes and ***ran*** to meet his son. Understand: This man was nearly twice my age, wearing probably twice the weight of my clothing, and definitely commanded twice the amount of respect in his village...in an all-out sprint! Allow me to illustrate... Think its funny watching me run? What about him? And yet the loving father didn't think of it for a moment. ***He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him.***

Meanwhile, in through the folds of arms and robes, the son is trying to get out his carefully prepared speech. But the father would have none of it. As far as he was concerned, it was a done deal. We

often say “Why don’t you kiss and make up?” But it is really the other way around, isn’t it? We make up and the kiss becomes the symbol of the reconciliation. Even before the father took that first step off the porch he had already settled his relationship with his son.

Just *behold this father’s love* as he orders his servants **‘Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.**

²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’ Then they began to celebrate. *Behold the father’s love* for his son who had been lost in sin!

Yes, *Behold the ☩ Father’s love* for those lost in sin. *Behold the father’s love* for you and me! Yes, as much as we hate to admit it, there is a prodigal son lurking inside each one of us. Maybe we never took dad’s money, ran away from home, gambled, and drank till the pigs came home. Maybe we never lay in a gutter hoping for food fit for swine. But we have wasted what God our heavenly Father has freely given to us. Like the prodigal son, we too **have sinned against heaven**. We, too, have shattered our relationship with our heavenly Father. We too are guilty of squandering and taking for granted God’s spiritual and physical blessings to us. We see our own “lostness,” our own rebellion against God’s ways as we try to take our destiny into our own hands, trying to run *our* lives as *we* want to run them, *when* we want to run them, *how* we want to run them. We all, at times, **have wandered from the faith** (1Tm 6:10) and found ourselves lost in sin. We, too, come up with our own plans for how to work things out with our heavenly father.

But thanks be to God, we *behold the father’s love*. Not a love that waited for us to come to him, but a love that sought out the lost; not a love that was worried about dignity or honor, but a love that was humilatingly poured out in the blood of Jesus on the cross; not a love that

denies forgiveness to rebellious children, but a love that runs to us, hugs us, kisses us, and welcomes us home – a love that welcomes us into the celebration of heaven. *Behold the father’s love*.

Let’s pray:

Heavenly Father, we sit this morning in awe as we behold your amazing love for those lost in sin. Your love is beyond us even as your welcoming arms surround us. Thank you for your love that has made us your children. Forgive us for wandering away from your love. Bring us back through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And fill us with the power of your Holy Spirit to behold and live in your love all the days of our lives.

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would bless us this week as we ponder your Word heard this morning. Return us again to your house on Wednesday to ponder your son’s passion and again next Sunday as we anticipate beholding your love in the rest of this beautiful parable. For those not with us this morning, encourage those physically unable to be with us, keep safe all those who are traveling, guide those with misguided priorities, and use us to bring back all those wandering from your home.

We ask for all of these things according to your good and gracious will through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.