

## **“God of Fairness or Mercy?”**

Message by DD Adams

Providence United Methodist Church

Communion Sunday

4th Sunday In Lent

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This mornings’ Scripture reading comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 15, verses 1 through 3 and verses 11b through 32. I’ll be reading from *The Common English Bible*. All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus told them this parable: Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

“When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.”’ So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said,

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it.

We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on.

The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him.

He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”

This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. God we pray blessing on this word. Bless all of it—the reading, hearing, understanding, and doing as we turn toward you acknowledging our need for *your* mercy and compassion. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen . . . . .

Peace be with you! This story is surely the most well-known and popular one in the New Testament. It ranks right up there with the Good Samaritan. You may have noticed the word “prodigal” isn’t even used in the story. Evidently the story was labeled “The Prodigal Son” and it stuck.

Looking at verse 1, we can see the polarization that emerged between the Pharisees and legal experts and who they considered unworthy folk—like tax collectors and sinners. They were gathered around Jesus listening. The Pharisees and legal experts were there too grumbling about Jesus. They wondered why he welcomed sinners into his company.

In verse 11 the story tells of a father with two sons. The younger son is foolish and wants to make himself independent of his father. So he asks for his inheritance, and his father gives it to him. Then the son leaves home. He wastes his inheritance and ends up feeding pigs without anything to eat himself. When he comes to his senses, he returns home—humbled and seeing himself for who he is. Now his father sees him from a distance and runs to meet him! He puts his best robe on him, places a ring on his finger, and puts sandals on his feet. All of which are symbols of his status as heir. Then the father tells his servants to make a feast.

When the older son learns of his brother’s return, he complains. He doesn’t understand why his father would do this! He never received even a young goat! He accuses his brother of gobbling up his father’s estate on prostitutes, which the younger son never mentioned. Then he stands outside the party and was furious—refusing to go in to celebrate.

So we have a son who squanders his inheritance wanting only to profit from the relationship. We also have a resentful, unmerciful older son with no compassion. He refuses to enter in to the feast given for his younger brother, and

he compares himself to a slave. Then we have a foolish father, as some might call him, who is uncommonly, recklessly extravagant with his mercy.

Now on the positive side, the younger son confesses his sin feeling unworthy because of his lack of loyalty. An older son who's been obedient and reliable, and a father who's lavish with his love and acceptance. Who do you identify with in the story? . . . . .

The son who followed all the rules gets slighted, and the son who was wasteful and disrespectful receives love and mercy from his father. The older son's response is like the religious men in verse 1. Jesus is welcoming tax collectors and sinners, and the holy men are offended. Then a few verses down we find Jesus portraying an earthly father who just keeps on giving and forgiving and giving and forgiving; this is the father. The word prodigal means "recklessly extravagant."

It's a story about love and grace. The father of the 2 sons portrays is extravagant, like Jesus. He's excessive with mercy, grace, and love. He's overwhelmingly joyful at his son's return—for he once was lost and now he's found! Instead of the father being angry and rejecting him he receives him back. Do you think the father goes too far with his mercy? Is he too accepting and forgiving? Do we find *ourselves* at times rejecting someone because of their foolish behavior?

Maybe we identify ourselves with the older brother, and we have a self-righteousness about ourselves. The problem with the older brother standing outside the party is that he forfeits his relationship with the Father—and that's Father with a capital F. The bitter and merciless older son refuses to enter into the feast, and now he's the one who's lost.

Deuteronomy 6:10 and 11 reads like this. “. . . the LORD your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to

give you, great and splendid cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things *which you did not fill*, and hewn cisterns *which you did not dig*, vineyards and olive trees *which you did not plant*, and you eat and are satisfied.”

So much for the self-made man. We owe our success over a lifetime to others. We're all a composite of many people giving into our lives. Do you think it's fair the younger son was forgiven and received back as an heir after he wasted all his father had given him? The story doesn't show the future; it's left unresolved. Maybe he does something worse a year later? What will the father do then?

Bottom line, none of us get to heaven based on what we do. The work needed for our forgiveness have already been accomplished by Christ. We're counted worthy not based on our successes or rule following. We're counted worthy and given mercy because of Christ's worthiness. We're not the focus.

The focus of the story is the Father. When the father sees the younger son from a distance he runs to him! Before the son can even begin to express his confession the father embraces him and welcomes him back.

Where do we find ourselves in the story? Our family is Christ's universal church, and this church is part of that. We forgive and show mercy to each other just as Christ shows forgiveness and mercy to us. Who do you identify with? I want to be like the father—recklessly extravagant in kindness, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. It's the father who's prodigal—but surely not in waywardness—this father is reckless and extravagant with his forgiveness! As a Christian, who do you identify with?

God of mercy and love, our heart's desire is to be like you. Our greatest need is you, and we're desperate and lost without your constant presence guiding us. Stop us from running on empty. Build us up with a strong heart that's filled with compassion and forgiveness—just like the Father. Amen.