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St. Luke 15:1-3; 11-32:

## **How Many Prodigals?**

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St. Luke 15:1-3; 11-3

Dear Friends in Christ,

Victor Hugo, a French author and politician of the past, wrote, "The supreme happiness of life is the conviction of being loved for yourself, or, more correctly, being loved in spite of yourself." We might want to think about that: "being loved in spite of yourself." - in spite of who or what you are - loving others in the same way, in spite of who or what they are. A lot of people are hard to take...aren't they?

The church father Augustine wrote: "Love has two hands to help others. It has feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of man. This is what love looks like." And extending that kind of love to others isn't any easier, is it? But it's what we want from God. Consider the opening words of our text:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them (vv.1-20).

The tax collectors and sinners were looking for help. The self-righteous Pharisees and scribes were another story. They saw themselves as "somebodies"... until the grave grabbed them by their ankles. So, the question . .

## HOW MANY PRODIGALS?

### I. Wasted Living

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to the Father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them (vv.11-12)."

This account is entitled, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Webster defines "prodigal" as "...recklessly extravagant...characterized by wasteful expenditure." And that was the young man. We're told, "Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living (v.13)." Indeed, he was prodigal - and lost.

And listen to this: the father didn't stop him. The son wasn't a robot the father programmed. And it's a picture of what can and often happens to God's children in Christ when lured by the "high life," the "What can I get out of this world?" life." Time with God only when convenient...or needed. It's a picture of the sinful, human nature that's ready to push God aside for the love of sweat and dirt - this world and the journey to the grave.

Next, the typical consequence: "...he squandered his property in reckless living...So he went and hired himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs (vv.13-15). Life with the pigs. Wallowing in mud and eating pig food. Sweat. Ah...freedom to do your thing...while on the way to the dirt.

I'm not advocating his philosophy, but the statement stings with truth; from Erich Fromm: "Man becomes the eternal suckling with an open mouth, taking without effort and without inner activeness (real thought) whatever the boredom preventing industry forces on him - cigarettes, liquor, movies, TV, lectures." I know, it's dated. Today he would have included zombie making phones, drugs, and exposing your life on the internet.

### II. Arms Wide Open

But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father (vv.17-20).

This is truth the world and most of the church avoid: "I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy...". To confess that tears into our self-esteem - and the ruptured theology of most of the church today that creates a god who will comply with human feelings and wants. It hits with the clearest of Scripture, the one few want to hear: "None is righteous, no not one, no one understands, no one seeks for God (Rm.3:10-11)." It's the truth we must confess: "If we say we have no sin the truth is not in us (I Jn.1:8)."

Some of us can recall the comedian from the past, W.C. Fields. You might remember the story that shortly before his death a friend visited him in the hospital. When he entered Fields' room he saw Fields looking through the Bible. He asked Fields what he was doing with the Bible. Fields answered, "I'm looking for loopholes." That's the problem for many today. But there are none. It means what it says.

### III. The Love of God

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "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." And they began to celebrate (vv.20-24).

This takes us to the incomprehensible love of God: "But while he was a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion...". It appears he had been looking for his son for some time. And when the father saw him he "felt compassion, and ran to his son, embraced and kissed him." There's no re-hashing of sin. No, "Don't ever do this again!"

This is a dramatic picture of God's love for the repentant heart. He sees what's inside the heart. He sees every sin against Him, the messes we've made, our regrets and shame, our want to be right with Him. The son made his confession, and look what happened, to repeat . . .

And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants...bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate."

Again, it's over! No walk down memory lane. No threats. When the roots we plant in this world start pulling us away from the Lord, when the sin and guilt pull us into deep sorrow, when life grabs and chokes us, hold on to this from God's Word: "Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back (Is.38:17)." For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, God no longer sees our sins. Remember: "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins (Is.44:25)."

At the beginning of this sermon we were informed from St. Luke's Gospel, "and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them (v.2b).'" "This man" was God in the flesh. And God would say to them, "...I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Lk.15:7)" - and such don't exist! And that brings us to the question...

### IV. To Make Alive

"What about the other son?" We're told, "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing (v.26)." When he found out it was a celebration for the return and repentance of his brother we're told, "...he was angry and refused to go in (v.28)." His father encouraged him, but the older son insisted, "...these many years I served you...you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends (v.29)." He considered himself more deserving

of his Father's love, a better person than his brother. He was along the line of the Pharisee: self-righteous. What happened next is what the self-righteous don't want to hear:

"But when this son of yours came, who has also devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" And the father said to him, "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 (vv.30-32)."

Maybe, sometimes, it's too easy to forget, or, maybe, the love of self and arrogance get in the way of, "None is righteous, no, not one. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless, no one does good, not even one (Rm.3:10,11)." The truth is, no-one in this sanctuary or outside this sanctuary is more deserving of God's love than anyone else. Actually, we deserve hell.

The truth is, "we were by nature children of wrath (Eph.2:3b)." We "were dead in our trespasses and sin in which we once walked (Eph.2:1-2)." Once again, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (I Jn.1:8)." We were dead, would never receive the unending, unchanging love of the Triune God, unless God intervened. We know the words, don't we: "...the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (I Jn.1:7)."

So, **How Many Prodigals** are there? Everyone. This Parable is an astonishing reminder: He loves and wants us forever. And so, Jesus' journey to Calvary: To make prodigals alive!

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott