

The Rev. Randall R. Shirley
Sermon: Whose Righteousness?
Luke 15:11-32
October 4, 2020

This morning, our Gospel Reading has us in the parable of The Prodigal Son, Or, as we now refer to as the parable of the Two Sons, and still others refer to this parable as the Joy of the Father.

I often think upon that old Sunday School definition of a parable. As a young child, and I know many of you were also taught, that a parable is basically an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. But I find that this Sunday School definition falls short of what Jesus was up to then, and what Jesus is up to now.

You see, Jesus invites us to hear His words and then look at how we live and how we are to respond to Him and others around us. When I was in seminary studying this passage, our professor asked this question: “Which of the characters in this account is the saddest?” As we reflected on the story, one of my classmates raised his hand then boldly stated, “The saddest one in this story is the fattened calf.”

Let us open our Bibles to Luke and put our reading into context to better understand God’s teaching in this parable. At the end of Chapter 14, in verse 35, Jesus closes this chapter by saying, “he who has ears to hear let him hear.” The people who had ears and were willing to follow Jesus were all sorts of people and known sinners who drew near to Him. This outraged the religious elite.

So, as we enter Chapter 15, we find in the opening verses, that not only are there tax collectors, assorted sinners and common people listening to Jesus, the religious leaders are also there grumbling about Jesus. Look at verse 2, Chapter 15 with me. The Pharisees and Scribes are there, and they are grumbling, and muttering among themselves, saying, “this man (Jesus) receives sinners and He even eats with them.”

Jesus, knowing their hearts, begins to tell them a series of three parables. Three parables of rejoicing celebrations that speak into the attitude of these self-righteous religious leaders. Three back-to-back stories having to do with something that was lost and then was found. The first account is about a Shepherd who lost one of his hundred sheep, and he leaves the 99 to find the one that is lost. When he finds the lost sheep, he calls all his friends and all his neighbors to rejoice with him. It is a great story that all of us can relate to, a celebration of the Shepherd’s success.

Jesus then tells the story of the lost coin. The woman who had ten silver coins and lost one. After she lights a lamp and searches her house, she finally finds it, and she calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. Again, another celebration of joy over the finding of what was lost. It is here that Jesus now comes to the heart of the matter within this third parable. It is much deeper than just finding what was lost.

It is a familiar story to many of us. It begins with a father who has two sons. Look with me in verse 15. The younger son comes to his father and says, “I want my inheritance now,” and the father divides his property between the two sons. After Jesus gets to this part of the story, He immediately has the attention of the religious leaders who are listening.

He has their attention because, Jesus is telling this story to those who understand that family inheritance is governed by law. We know that in Deuteronomy 21, the first-born son receives a double portion to the other sons when the father dies. For a son to request his inheritance before the death of his father would be an insult. Not only would the son be out his mind, a father would be equally out of this mind to give-in to such a ridiculous request. Not only is this a selfish act by the son, it is one that dishonors the father as if the son is saying, “I can’t stand being around you, I wish you were dead, just give me what is mine. I want nothing to do with this family.” And the father says, “ok.”

You can just imagine the religious leaders shocked to hear the opening of this parable. Not only is the son’s request shameful, but the father’s response is even more so. You do not give into someone’s insolent behavior. There is no way a father would respond this way. But of course, as astute Christians, we are already seeing the unfolding characters in this story. The son representing our selfish nature, and the graciousness of God represented in the father.

Jesus pointing to the amazing indulgence God has for His children. His Grace in the midst of our insolent, shameful, sinful ways. After squandering all his inheritance through reckless living, with nothing left, the younger son finally comes to his senses. Look at verse 17 in our story. It reads, “when he came to himself.” And the Greek phrase used here is often translated as “when brought to his senses.” It is a profound statement - that “ah-ha” moment. It so often comes out of our challenging circumstances. Those hardships that move us beyond ourselves to have that “ah-ha” moment. To have that true assessment of our broken condition.

A true assessment of our sinful nature. It is the first step towards repentance. Repentance always takes you back to where you sinned, so that you can admit that it was wrong and to be determined NOT to follow that path again. We see this in verse 18, as Jesus gives us the right attitude we are to have with our father. We are not to gloss over our sin. We are to go and say, “Father, I have sinned against you.”

What we find, is that the father is always waiting for us. Even while the son was still a long way off, the father sees and runs to embrace him. Through our confessing repentance we are reconciled with the father and restored within the father’s household. Again, we see there is joy over one who is found. This is the father’s joy; and the father and his household celebrate. What appears as a great story of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration; a story of the lost being found, is anything “but” to the Pharisees and Scribes.

Unlike the first two parables, where the religious leaders can see God who finds the lost sheep, who can see God who finds the lost coin, this parable lacks any sense of Jewish law for the atoning of sin. To the religious leaders, this story lacks any mention of works required toward repentance and reconciliation. It is at this point; Jesus focuses in on his targeted audience. Jesus zeros-in on the self-righteous religious leaders by bringing in the older son into this story,

The older son who is out in the field, who hears the music, the on-going celebration, is then told that his father has killed the fattened calf rejoicing in his brother's safe return. The older son is furious. He will have nothing to do with his younger brother. He will have nothing to do with the celebration. To the Pharisees and Scribes the story is sounding a little better. To them, the older son seems like the righteous and sensible one in this family.

It is in our self-righteous minds that we justify our anger. We convince ourselves how right we are to look down on others as the older son does. In his mind, he always did what was right, and always did what he was told. He even knows when the sermon is too long or when the sermon is too boring (joke). It is the sin of the self-righteous to become angry, abrasive, and hostile to those they think less of. It is the older son's self-righteous assault on the integrity of the family that now dishonors the father.

The older son is now the accuser of both his brother and his father. Look at verse 30. "This son of yours has devoured his inheritance with prostitutes, and when he returns, you kill the fattened calf for him." The older son asking, "And what about me? I never got a goat to celebrate with my friends." What is revealed in the self-righteous are hearts that only serve, only obey for what is due to them. In their self-righteousness they also long to be served the way they want to be served.

Where selfishness leads to rebelling against the Father's Goodness, self-Righteousness leads to resenting the Father's Goodness. Jesus does not give us a picture of two sons: one good, and one bad. Rather, Jesus gives us a picture of two sons: both bad. Both have broken from the father. The selfish and the self-righteous may look different on the outside, but on the inside, they are exactly the same. Both are kept from being in proper relationship with the father.

I want us to catch the significance of this parable, as it is not primarily a picture of the conversion of a sinner, but rather the restoration of a sinner. The main character being the forgiving and loving father. The three parables Jesus tells in Chapter 15, as the religious leaders are listening, deal with the trinity. God, The Son, as the Shepard in the first parable; God, The Holy Spirit, as the light in the second, and God, The Father, who loves his children in the third. It is truly a parable of the Joy of the Father. For God has great joy when the lost are found, and when we, as believers, repent of our sins.

Only when we walk in His light, in His righteousness, is when we find proper fellowship with the Father and with each other. Jesus says, "I tell you that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Today, our message for us, as believers, brings us to reflect on whose righteousness is our life an example, our own or His? It is the Heart of the Matter where so many of us, as brothers and sisters, need that Spirit led true assessment of our sinful nature to have again that "ah ha" moment!

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

Let us pray.