

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
"Unconditional Love"
Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 31, 2019
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Wandering Away]

On a cold February night in 2001, one-year-old Ericka somehow wandered out of her house and spent the entire night outside. When her mother, Leyla Nordby, found her daughter, she appeared to be totally lifeless. Her legs were stiff and her body frozen, and all the signs of life appeared to be gone.

Ericka was treated at Edmonton's Stollery Children's Health Center. To the amazement of doctors, the toddler showed no sign of damage. They gave Ericka a clear prognosis; she would soon hop and skip and play like other girls her age.

Some of us have wandered away from our Father's house, and it has brought us near the point of death. Our hearts have hardened, and our spiritual bodies look as lifeless as the little girl in the snow. But our Father knows we are missing and He is searching for us. He can take our lifeless body and restore us to health.¹

It is only God the Father who can pick us up and bring us back to His house.

[Amazing Love]

This morning, we heard about God the Father's amazing love for us in our gospel lesson. It is no wonder that the Parable of the Prodigal Son has become a favorite of Christians.

How many of us forgive one another without any conditions? But this is what God the Father does for us and we are to do the same with our family, friend and neighbor.

¹ 1001 Illustrations that Connect (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 244.

We forgive, because God first forgave us through His Son Jesus, when Jesus took on our sin and made us righteous through His suffering, death and resurrection. God did not have to do any of this, but He did it out of His love for us.

But for us, it is often our sinful pride that gets in the way of forgiving others. We want to lord it over each other. We like that power.

The same goes if we are the one repenting of our sin against our family, friend and neighbor. How many of us fear that we will not be truly forgiven by the other?

So, today, we hear again about God's amazing and unconditional love for each and every one of us as Jesus tells us the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

[The Parable of the Prodigal Son]

As the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled about Jesus saying: ***“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*** (Luke 15:1-3).

So, Jesus began speaking the parable of God's unconditional love as He spoke about a father and his two sons.

The younger son wanted his share of the inheritance ***now***. He couldn't wait to get away from his family. He wanted to live his own life on his own.

So, his father gave the younger son his share of the inheritance and his son leaves into the far country.

Now, the entire Jewish community would have been aware of this, so this event would not only be known to the family. As was tradition, one would receive their inheritance after the father would have died, not while he was still alive. People would know. People would talk. People would wonder where the younger son went.

Also, the process of disposing of the estate would have been difficult for the younger son in a community that would be completely opposed to the prodigal's request. At the same time, the community would be equally shocked at the father for even allowing this.

So, the prodigal son would have had to cut a quick deal with someone unscrupulous enough to help a young man turn his property into cash. So, it is likely that the prodigal son went from person to person to turn his inheritance into liquid assets so he could go to that distant country where no one would know him.

I'm sure he was turned down time after time as community members displayed public disgust at him. Some people may have just displayed amazement, others horror and others flat out rejection of him.

But in the end, this prodigal son was able to turn his inheritance into cash as he moved away from his family and started over.

After some time living in luxury, the prodigal son eventually spent his last penny. He squandered it all in reckless living. He had no plan on growing his wealth, but instead spent every last cent.

Now, we don't know exactly what the prodigal son did with his money. All we know is that he was reckless. We also know that he was only thinking of himself. He had only *his own* best interest in mind, even though his interests ended up costing him everything.

So, in just a matter of time the prodigal son went from no worries in his life with his inheritance to being penniless and hungry.

Then he hired himself out to one of the citizens of the country — a Gentile — who hired him to feed the pigs.

If he wasn't already at rock bottom, he is now there. He is a Jew working for a Gentile. On top of that, he is a Jew feeding pigs. This is the lowest of the lows. He is not only rendering himself unclean and outcast, but this shows how far he has sunk in his own personal demise.

He is feeding unclean pigs and yet, he wishes he was an unclean pig, so at least he could eat. He is longing to feed on the pods that the pigs ate, even though it would be unappetizing and lack the nourishment he truly needs.

He has lost it all. He is scraping by through feeding pigs. And, the only friends he has left are the pigs he feeds. At least the pigs cared for him, in as much as they could.

The prodigal has no real friends and he has alienated his family and his community with him only thinking of himself.

He then comes to the realization that his father's servants have it a million times better than he has it now. The servants have plenty of food. The servants have clean clothing. The servants have a safe place to sleep at night.

Here is when the prodigal becomes determined to come back home and repent of his sins. So, he begins practicing what he is going to say to his father: ***“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants”*** (Luke 15:18).

I wonder how many times it took him saying that repeatedly to get up the courage to make his journey back. I'm sure it wasn't easy. His pride had fallen.

So, while the prodigal son was still a long way off from knocking on his father's door, his father sees him coming.

You see, ever since the prodigal son left, his father has been searching for him. His father never gave up on him. His father searched day after day in hopes of finding his lost son and bringing him home.

As soon as his father saw him, he began running toward his son and once he met his lost son, he hugged him and kissed him. His son began to speak his prepared speech to his father, but his father didn't care what he spoke. All he was thinking was that his lost son ***“was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found!”*** (Luke 15:24 and Luke 15:32).

I'm sure this catches the prodigal son off-guard. He wants to work off his debts, because he is the cause of his miserable sinful condition against his father and against heaven. He came back not to be called son, but to become a servant. He is a true outcast, just like the tax collectors and sinners who were coming to be near Jesus and to hear Jesus speak.

In the first century, repentance was seen different than today. In that time, repentance was understood as a human work with conditions, terms and reparations. Repentance was something that humans could initiate outside God's initiative. This is why the prodigal son wished to work off his debt as a servant.

But instead, his father does something radical: He forgives his son without any conditions. His father reinstates his lost son as his son. The lost son has been given the dignity and status as son.

His father calls the 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!”*** (Luke 15:22-24).

[Continuously Searching for the Lost]

This parable displays God’s unconditional love for all of us. God the Father is always searching for everyone on this earth when they wander off in search of their own desires.

Many times people wander off because they feel that the church is too judgmental. Or they seek another church that appears to be free from judgement – a church that pleases our itching ears, instead of being fed with God’s truth, which afflicts and comforts. This is similar to the prodigal son, who wanted it **his** way. Until he realized that his way was getting him nowhere.

For it doesn’t matter what you do. God **will** forgive you when you repent. You could quit coming to church for decades, you could murder a person, you could ruin another person’s reputation, you could steal property from your neighbor, you could be engaged in a sinful sexual lifestyle, such as being gay, lesbian, transgender, or even watch pornography. It doesn’t matter if you lie, cheat and steal. For as long as you repent of your sin and trust in Jesus, you are forgiven by God the Father. No conditions, just love and forgiveness.

Yes, you may still have to face consequences in this life, but in the life to come, you are forgiven. Your sins are wiped clean!

This is truly amazing unconditional love. You see, God the Father is continuously searching for the lost. We see that especially in Luke 15 where Christ teaches us three parables where God is searching for the lost. He is searching for anyone who has wandered away from His presence with the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son — the prodigal son.

[The Older Son]

At the same time, when God the Father forgives the lost and brings them back into his flock, we — who have been loyal — may sometimes feel like the older son in this parable.

When the older son heard the celebration for his lost brother, he was upset. He was angry.

He was likely thinking the following:

Why should this lost son be rewarded? Why haven't I been rewarded for my loyalty? Where is my party? Why don't you remember the sins that my younger brother committed against you? My younger brother spent his inheritance on sinful living! Why are you throwing him a party?!

We may become like the older brother when we see a person we know who has committed public sins be forgiven. We may take offense to that, like the Pharisees and scribes.

But, everyone in Christ receives the same inheritance. It doesn't matter if you sinned against God in thought, word and deed all your life and repent on your deathbed, or if you live your entire life in repentance. We all receive the same reward. We all receive salvation.

[Unconditional Love]

The one true God — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — does not put conditions on His love for you and for me. He loves us all! He only desires that each one of us repent and trust in Jesus, for He alone gives us forgiveness. We do struggle with forgiving others. We struggle with forgiving and forgetting.

It is only God who unconditionally forgives and forgets our sins.

We were all lost when we were born. But, we were found when God drowned us in our baptism as we died to sin and rose to new life in Jesus.

Now, some of us know others who have wandered from the one true Christian faith, but God the Father is continuously searching for them and He never gives up.

For it is God's desire that no one perishes into damnation, but that everyone is saved through His Son Jesus, who gave His life as a sacrifice for our sins, so that we would be found and forgiven through His death and resurrection. We are given God's unconditional love by grace through faith in Jesus.

As sinners, who need forgiveness, Christ forgives our sins at each Divine Service with confession and absolution. Better yet, Christ even throws us a party – a foretaste of the feast to come – when we receive His very Body and His very Blood, which forgives our sins and strengthens our weak faith in the Lord's Supper.

Because we are forgiven and reconciled through Jesus – who took on our sin and punishment to make us righteous – we too are to forgive one another as we have been unconditionally forgiven by God. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠