



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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March 18, 2007
4th Sunday in Lent
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 12:1-6
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 32
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

A Father's Amazing Love

I have been greatly blessed by my God during my life on earth. I have been greatly blessed by my God during my life on earth when it comes to my family life. Now you can look over there behind me and they are kind of dressed up and look kind of good today. They certainly have been a blessing to me. But I want to focus in on a different specific blessing in my family life that God has given me, and that is the blessing of my father. I was blessed by God to have a father who dearly loved me and taught me how important Jesus is.

I have told some of you this before in various Bible classes and that, but some of the best theology courses I ever had were probably when we would drive after church to Sullivan's. That is where we went every Sunday. On the way there, Dad and I would debate the sermon. It didn't matter if we really agreed with each other, he would take one side and I would take the other and then we would just debate the whole way there about what the pastor had said in the sermon. It was fascinating. I did that from when I was in third or fourth grade on until I was in high school and then beyond while I was home. It was fascinating. It was enjoyable.

I was blessed by God to have an earthly father who loved his Lord and taught me to love the Lord. For that I will be eternally grateful. But as they say, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. My earthly father was by no means a perfect man. He is not a perfect man. Some of the imperfections I learned from my father, my children have to live with from day to day. It is interesting. When Dad was just here for basketball and we watched the games and saw one of his grandsons maybe getting a little upset on the basketball court, he looked at me and smiled and said, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?" He had to teach me to control myself just like he had to teach himself to control himself at times.

Earthly fathers aren't perfect, though. I was blessed to have a wonderful father. I am blessed to have a wonderful father and yet many in this world go through this world without that blessing from God. So if you have it, be thankful. But we all have the blessing of living with the amazing love of our Father—our heavenly Father.

As you consider that Parable I read to you from the Gospel, it is really talking about this unbelievable love that God has for each and every one of us. A love that goes beyond understanding and a love unlike my love for my children, or your love for your children, or your love for your parents, or whatever the case may be—it is a perfect love that is absolutely and always perfect. It does things that I can't even begin to fathom. That is

what we see this morning. As we look at this Parable, we see the amazing love that this father has for a son who thought he knew better and also the amazing love he has for a son who thought he did better.

Did you notice the setting of this Parable? Did you catch the context in which this Parable is told? That is why those first three verses are in there even though we skip over the Parable of the Lost Coin to the Parable of the Lost Son. It was because the Pharisees, the people that were the “it” people when it came to Jewish religious life, the ones that knew everything and were looked up to for knowing everything and doing everything—they were looking down on Jesus and complaining and muttering because Jesus was hanging out with people that were obvious sinners. It was obvious that their actions had separated them from God and that the Pharisees and others in society looked down on them because of that separation. But remember, Jesus had told Zacchaeus that the Son of God came to seek and save that which was lost. Those who knew their sin were ready to hear the message that Jesus was the answer to sin. Those who thought they had no sin, they didn’t need a Savior from sin—at least they didn’t think they did.

So because they were muttering about that, Jesus tells this Parable to talk about the situation that the sinners found themselves in, like the son who ran away—wasted everything, longing to eat hog food and comes to his senses and says, “You know what? I had it so much better with my father. I was an idiot. I went my own way. I thought I knew better and now I see that I don’t.” That is the picture of those sinners—the tax collectors and the Pharisees—and that is the picture of each and every one of us. By our own sinful nature, we all think we know better. God says something to us. We think we know better, especially if it is something that we don’t want to do.

We talked about that this morning in Bible study at length—how selfish at times we can be. We can turn selfishness into something noble. We were talking this morning about giving offerings to the Lord in the widow’s life and how I can convince myself that those people don’t take care of the money well enough, so I am not going to give as much to the Lord because that will teach them to give better and that is my noble reason for being selfish. I am still just being selfish, but I’ve convinced myself that it sounds good. I convinced myself that I know better than God does.

Well, that guy ran off and wasted everything he had. He comes to his senses and then he realizes just how desperate he was. He said, “I will go back and I will beg just to become a hired worker again.” But did you notice that when he comes back and that whole speech that we had heard at least part of it rehearsed, did you see how far he got into it? He didn’t even get to the part about “let me be your hired worker,” right? The father’s amazing love interrupted him and said, “Let’s have a party. Let’s celebrate because he is back. The one who I thought was dead is alive again. He has come back to me.”

It must be nice to be that loved, right? When is the last time someone said, “Let’s go kill a calf and have some food and have a party because of you”? It doesn’t happen all that often, right?—maybe for some milestone. How great it must be to have that kind of love

flowing over you and comforting you. Do you think that son could have felt any more love at that moment than what he did?

The reality of it is that it's not just Jesus talking about terrible sinners, like the tax collectors and the Pharisees. He is not just talking about the ones that we would look down on as the outcasts of society—maybe sexual offenders that can only live in a certain area that we think are so much worse than we are. That is Jesus describing each and every one of us. By nature you and I are separated from God. We have nothing we can offer up to him. We can't say, "Lord, look at what I have done. You should love me now." You and I should go to hell. You and I should be hated by God. You and I should be struck down by God, but we are not. Instead, what does he do? He leaves heaven. He comes to this world. He lives in our place. He dies in our place. He gives us the Holy Spirit in the water and the Word, the wafer and the wine. He showers his love on us day after day after day and can't wait for us to wake up and come back to him so he can throw his arms around us and say, "I forgive you. I love you. Heaven is yours. I don't want to hear what you have done. I want to know that you trust in my Son who has taken away your sins, and that is that! And you know what? I will even give that to you through the work of the Holy Spirit through water and wine and wafer and the Word."

That is our God! His amazing love is love that goes beyond understanding. Why would he love us that much? Would you really love someone that much that thumbed their nose at you and said, "Can I have what I should have when you are dead? I want it now. Thanks. Bye." I would have a hard time loving someone that much.

Yet, that is how God loves you. That is how God loves me. That is how God loves each and every one of us. That is an incredibly wonderful thing. Even though we think we know better, God still loves us.

But, not only is Jesus alive and active and working in our lives, there is also Satan alive and active and working in our lives to try to lead us away from God. One of the things he does, even after we have come to know what Jesus has done for us, even after we have come to rejoice that he loves us that much, Satan now sneaks in and says, "Okay. You have that faith in your heart and I know that saves you, but you know what? I am going to keep working on trying to undermine it." One of the ways he tries to undermine it is by getting us to start thinking like that second son—that we do better, therefore God should love us more.

Honestly now, if you were that second son, would you be a little bit irritated when you came in from the field and saw the fattened calf slaughtered and heard dancing and celebrating because that idiot brother of yours who took the inheritance and ran off was back? Would you have been a little happier if your father would have made him like one of the servants so that you could have bossed him around a little bit and said "dance" or "jump" and then how high? I know my sinful nature would be much more comfortable doing that. If I would have been that other son, I would have been irritated.

The sad part is, I am that other son at times, and I do get irritated. I do think maybe at times God should love me more because of what I do for him. I know that is not right,

but I still feel that way at times. Do you ever find yourself thinking that way? “I have slaved and I have labored for you, Lord, and you love THAT person who has done THAT just as much as you love me? I’ve always been there Lord at church. I get to Bible study. I get myself out of bed and roll in there and sit down and speak up and listen and even smile at the pastor’s foolish jokes. You should love me more than you love those people that don’t.”

Do you struggle with that at times? I think we have to admit that at one time or another, we have all struggled with that and we all certainly were the son who was lost to begin with. This Parable of the Lost Son is the Parable of us. At one time or another, we are all in this place. We all think God owes us something because we have done something for him. If we love him and serve him, Satan is going to be right there trying to tell us that if that is the basis of your confidence, you can be confident when you are on your death bed because you have done something for God. NO! When I am on my death bed, I don’t want to look at what I’ve done, because I also know what I haven’t done, right? I also know what I’ve left undone that I wanted to do and I didn’t get done. I know the things I did that weren’t God pleasing. When I’m on my death bed, I want my face to be right up next to that cross, and I want to know that Jesus is taking me to heaven because of who he is and because of what he has done—not because of what I do.

If that is our confidence, we have every confidence. Why?—because of the Father’s amazing love. He reaches out to that son who was full of himself and says, “My son. Think about it. We have to celebrate.” He tries to lead that son to see the errors of his way.

The Parable never tells us what the son then did. We don’t know what the older son did. Jesus didn’t tell us that as part of the Parable, but if you think about what he is talking about, the Pharisees really fit the older son in this Parable and they ended up attacking and finally killing Christ.

The question for you and I is, when we find ourselves becoming the older son, will God’s law snap us out of it in time so that we see how we are sinning against him by having this attitude about ourselves? Then, will we cling to the cross of Christ—not to our own efforts—and find in there that forgiveness? And then, seeing the things that God lays in front of us to do to serve him, whatever it is, will we do it—not to get something from him, but to thank him for that gift of salvation? And will we do it with joy and with happiness because we have a Savior that loves us THAT much! By God’s grace, you and I can as we cling to the cross of Christ.