

Lent 4C, March 30, 2025

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Two Lost Sons and a Scandalously Good Father

Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

The Word of God for today is the father’s statement in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: **“This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found”** (Luke 15:24).

Sometimes our view of Jesus is a little bit too put together. We think of Him as the perfect man, which He was, but we think of everything around Him being perfect as well. What we find today, however, in Luke chapter 15 is that Jesus is in the middle—the very center—of a great big scandal. What do I mean? Just look at the company He keeps. Look at the type of people attracted to His teaching. Look at the group that gathers to eat with Him. Why, it’s nothing but a bunch of sinners and tax collectors—liars, cheats, adulterers, money-grubbers who’ve wasted what they’ve been given. Among the Pharisees and the scribes—and I think even in today’s world and among us, our Lord has quite the reputation: **“This man, Jesus of Nazareth, receives sinners and eats with them”** (Luke 15:2) He has fellowship with unrighteous people. What does the world say about the Church today? It’s filled with hypocrites.

It was—and still is—downright scandalous.

I.

And so Jesus them a scandalous parable in response, Luke 15. It’s the scandalous story of a man and his two sons.

The scandal begins with the younger son. He wanted his share of the inheritance, and he wanted it now. So he said to his dad and said, “Drop dead, dad. I mean it. Drop dead. I don’t care about your livelihood, that you’re still working the farm. Give me the share of the property that’s coming to me. Do whatever it takes—get a second mortgage, cash out your retirement account. I don’t care how, just get me my share. Now.” Here’s the first scandal. The father didn’t tell the son to get lost. He did what the son asked, though it broke his heart to do it. He divided the property. He gave the deed

to the son, and the son sold the rights to the family estate. It scandalized the entire village.

And then the son skipped town. He took the cash and got out of dodge. “[He] gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered the property in reckless living” (v 13). With no thought for tomorrow, he wasted the good gift of his father. He didn’t just waste his inheritance, he wasted his life—the life that he had from his father. He lived expensively. He spent every last dime until he had nothing left. Then “a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. Things weren’t going quite as well as they had been. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything” (vv 14–16). That’s a scandal right there as well. Quite the fall for that Jewish boy—no money, no income, estranged from the family, mucking pigs in a far country, with nothing to eat. It was as scandalous as the sinners and tax collectors gathered to hear Jesus. Think about those sinners and tax collectors—all the mud and filth they’d been dwelling in. He’s just like that.

It seems that there’s only one way to redeem such a scandal like this. It’s the way that occurred to the prodigal son. You clean up your act and straighten everything out. He must make amends. He must work hard, repay what he took, and earn back his place in the village and in the family. That’s what’s fair and just. And so that’s exactly what the younger son planned to do. The brilliant idea came while he fed the pigs: I don’t have to perish; I could return home, not as a son, but as a servant and I could eat the servant’s food. He knew how the system worked. So he prepared his little speech and practiced his confession until he had the lines down: “**Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.**” [*repeat with emphasis*] He knew what to say. He was ready to head back. “I don’t expect to be put back on the executive team for the family business. Just put me in the mailroom or the assembly line. Make me a hired servant” (vv 18, 19). In some ways it sounds like a bargain than an apology. He’s figured out exactly what he has to do and what he has to say to get back to where he wants to be. He didn’t want heaven. He just wants purgatory. Give me time, and I’ll earn my way back. He’d repay the inheritance and be a worthy son again. He’d prove himself to the father and to the village. He’d set things right, pay his dues, earn his way back. So he headed home.

He’s not the only one who thinks it works this way. That’s exactly what everyone expected to happen, especially the older son. He knew that his younger brother would beg and plead with their father, and he knew how the father would react: cross his arms, look down his nose, treat him with hardness and indifference. That’s the way it

worked. The prodigal would get what he deserved; he'd be treated like a servant, not like the older son. After all, the older son had worked hard all these years. He'd been a good boy, obedient, hardworking. He'd followed the rules faithfully, and his brother would have to do the same. The older son thought that he deserved the father's favor and respect and his own place in the family. He sounds a little bit like the Pharisees and the scribes in Jesus' day.

Now step out of the story for a moment and think about this in our own lives. Who are the people we look at and think they need to shape up, earn their way back, go through the hoops and the ringer before they can be restored? Who are the people we look at and say, "They don't deserve it yet"? They've gotta work a little harder. Show more repentance. Have a better confession. That's what the Pharisees and scribes are saying.

II.

But the story doesn't go that way at all. It takes an unexpected turn when the son heads up. The scandal deepens and becomes even bigger with the father. That father did what no father of that day—or maybe in ours—would ever have done. He watched with longing for his prodigal son day after day. You can picture him, without bitterness or anger, sitting there looking out the window. Waiting for the first moment he could see his son coming. He held no grudge and bore no resentment. No plan when his son returns to say, "Son, you drop dead." He wanted to be the first to reach his son when he returned home, before the other villagers could heap insults on him or drive him off. So he's watching and he's waiting and he's praying and he's hoping and he's longing. And one day, the father sees a little dust kicking up way down the road. He sees a young man, head hanging, shuffling back. He saw his son trudging down the road. He saw the son when he was still a long way off; when he was still far from and estranged from the father. And he had compassion on him. Instead of anger and rage, his insides twisted up in love and pity. And he did the unthinkable. The father ran to his son. He ran—robe flapping, legs showing, all decency thrown to the wind. Imagine me in my chasuble and alb taking off in a sprint right now. It wouldn't look pretty. Oh, the humiliation of it. It embarrassed the villagers to see the father do it. That's just not right. They turned their faces in shame. What kind of father is this? Running to his son!

There, at the edge of the village, the father found his younger lost son. He threw his arms around his son's neck, embraced him, and kissed him. And before the son could even finish his well-rehearsed line "Father, I have sinned . . ." begging just to be a servant, the father had already ordered gifts to be brought: the best robe for his grubby son, the family ring for his hand, and shoes for his feet. And while you're at it, kill the fattened calf, as well, the prized animal! I've been saving it for a special occasion. Tonight they would have a party, eat, drink, and celebrate. **"For this my son was dead,**

and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (v 24). And the scandalous celebration begins. Eat and be merry, for the father has found his son, revived him, received him back into the family in peace. Heaven rejoices!

This is the father’s scandal. The scandal is his love, his mercy, his forgiveness. The scandal is that he doesn’t demand anything back from that son. He deals with his sons by grace, not by the law. He demands nothing in repayment. He lavishes his favor freely. He gives everything as a gift, even though it’s undeserved. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation”** (2 Cor 5:19). God Himself takes the initiative to set things right. God Himself reaches out in love to restore the relationship that was broken, that every one of us sinners and tax collectors may again have a place in the family. And so we do.

III.

That isn’t the last time the father humiliates himself either. There’s the whole rest of the story that takes place *after* the younger son returns. The part with the older son. The father reaches out in love to the older son as well, to all of us Pharisees and scribes. That dutiful, obedient son causes a scandal of his own. That son who’s really sure that he’s done everything right and deserves it. Oh, he causes a scandal, too. As he returned from the field and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. He asked a servant boy what it meant, and the boy replied that the brother was home and the father was throwing a party. **“But he was angry and refused to go in”** (v 28). The older son did what he thought the father should’ve done. He stands outside and crosses his arms and has what I call a Jonah moment. He couldn’t stand the father’s love. He can’t bear the father’s forgiveness. He can’t understand the father’s mercy, so he stands outside and throws a pity party for himself.

If I were the father, I would’ve just let him do that. Stand there and stew, and then come back in when you’re done acting like a three-year old. The father should ignore him, but he doesn’t. He leaves the party, comes out to the older son in the courtyard, and pleads with him. It’s humiliating. Everyone inside can hear the son berate his father, yell and scream at him in an angry fit: **“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him! You’re no father of mine”** (vv 29–31). That’s what he says, and everyone hears it.

But the father doesn’t fight fire with fire. He speaks peace to the son who was near: **“Beloved son, beloved 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 31, 32). The father goes out to reconcile the older son to himself as well. Son, this feast is for you as well, for all of us. It’s for all the children God, that both the older and the younger may receive the father’s gifts and rejoice together as one family. Both sons live only by grace in the father’s house.

But this scandalous love of the father is costly. He pays a price to go after both his sons, to bring them from death to life, to find them in their lost condition and restore them to the family. It’s a love that forgives on account of Jesus Christ. What is the cost paid to bring both sons into the house? It’s the cross. The heavenly Father sends His only-begotten Son to do the humiliating work of reconciling lost sinners to himself. He sends His only begotten Son to do the humiliating work of embracing the muddy and grubby younger sons and to go out and plead for the older. He suffered and died for sinners like you and me, for tax collectors and prostitutes, self-righteous hypocrites, Pharisees, scribes, and stubborn brothers who refuse the Father’s grace.

This is the scandal we find ourselves right in the middle of—not the scandal of our sin, not the scandal of our stubbornness, but the scandal of the Father’s love for us, His sinful children, and the scandal of our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered for our redemption and who still receives sinners and eats with them. Where do you see yourself in this parable? Do you identify with the younger son, maybe having wasted your life in ways but the father running to embrace you? Or do you identify with the older son, always having done what is just and right and kind of holding it against the others that they get off so easy? Our father’s been waiting for us, watching for us, and now here in this moment He comes running for you. See how He falls upon you with His grace. See how He embraces you. See how He spreads out a feast and lavishes His gifts upon you. No sin should keep you from the Father’s kingdom. And there’s also no reason not to rejoice with the whole heavenly host over other sinners who repent and believe the gospel. It doesn’t matter how great their sin is. Repent! Return! Receive the Father’s love. The Lord who called to the sinners and tax collectors, the Lord who called to the scribes and the Pharisees, is the Lord who calls to you and me now. The call is this: “Join the celebration, come to the party. No, you haven’t earned it. No, you don’t deserve it, but here it is—My gift to you through My own suffering, death, and resurrection, through My blood.” Why? For we were dead, but now are alive in Christ; lost, but now we’ve been found forever. So let’s celebrate!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
