

*March 27, 2022*  
*Fourth Sunday of Lent*  
*Luke 15:1-3, 11-32*

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them Jesus addressed this parable:



"A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."' So he got up and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began.

Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

### **Background**

The fifteenth chapter of Luke contains three parables about God's ability to reach out and forgive: the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7), the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11-32). Luke introduces the three parables by saying that the Pharisees and scribes were complaining about the fact that Jesus associated with sinners and tax collectors.

“Tax collectors” were detested because they were notorious for extorting unreasonable sums from their countrymen. The money they took from their countrymen went to their own purses and to the Roman government. The thought that the limited resources of the community were going to a foreign occupying government was repulsive. “Sinners” were those whose way of life prevented them from regular observance of the law, and from maintaining ritual purity, and from keeping their covenant with God. Those who had contact with the dead, blood, or any unclean animal would also be referred to as “sinners.” The scribes and Pharisees believed that because Jesus was associating with these people and sharing meals with them, he was likewise unclean and should be considered one of them. Jesus seemed to see his association with the marginalized and outcasts as building a bridge between them and God.

The parable that Jesus tells in response to their objection is commonly referred to as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Jewish tradition discouraged fathers from giving their inheritance before death. But even when it was done, the father still retained the right to live off of the inheritance, and it was the responsibility of the sons to take care of the needs of their parents. The youngest son in the parable, by taking his inheritance and leaving, has abandoned his responsibility to his father. He is also behaving like the tax collectors, who take the wealth of the Jewish people and give it to non-Jews. He has brought shame upon himself, and Luke’s description of his state as the parable unfolds echoes that shame. When he takes responsibility for his predicament and decides to return home, he is at least acknowledging his responsibility to care for his father.

The elder son is also portrayed as lacking traditional respect for his father. In their culture, he had the responsibility to try to dissuade his younger brother from his plan that would bring disgrace upon himself and their family. The older son reveals his separation from his family responsibility by his refusal to enter the family home and help his father host the celebration with their neighbors. Instead, he laments that he never got to celebrate with his own friends. His comments belittle his father and his father’s compassion toward his brother, whom he refers to as “your son,” not “my brother.” (Luke 15:30)

From the very beginning of the parable, the father does not act according to the prevailing customs for the day. The request for his inheritance by the younger son is an insult. By granting the request, the father’s respect in the community would have been diminished. When the son returns, the father runs out to greet him, which would be taken as another sign of weakness. He gives the best robe, which normally would have been his, and sandals, a sign that he was not a servant, to his son. He does the same with the ring containing the seal of the family. The younger son now has the authority to carry on business in the name of the family. The fatted calf would normally provide food for a hundred or more people, suggesting that the celebration is for the whole community. The father is making a public statement. Even if the people of the community do not respect how he has handled his affairs, they will enjoy the fruits of his decisions. But by joining the celebration, they are giving public acceptance of the situation. The father also leaves the party to be with the elder son, which would also be a sign of weakness. Again, he reaches out personally, to invite the older son to come and be part of the family and the celebration. The father is consistent; he is true to himself.

### Reflection Questions

1. The opening verses of this week’s gospel describe a situation where Jesus is having a meal with sinners and tax collectors of the day, while the Pharisees and scribes are outside complaining about what is going on inside the house. If you take the time to imagine this scene for yourself, where are you? Why?

2. When you think of the Pharisees and scribes complaining about Jesus being with sinners and tax collectors, who comes to mind?
3. The younger son seems to be initially motivated by his deplorable condition in deciding to make his return. What does that suggest you?
4. The younger son realizes that he is no longer worthy to be called his father's son. Does his older brother have the same awareness?
5. Place yourself in the parable as the younger son. What would it take for you to return to your home town and face your community, your older brother, and your father?
6. Place yourself in the parable as the older brother. What is going through your mind as you approach the house after a full day of working and hear the sounds of music and dancing? What are you feeling? What are your thoughts toward your father, and toward your brother?
7. Now imagine that your father comes to invite you to the celebration. What are you thinking as he approaches? What will you say to him?
8. Can you take some time now to talk with God about whatever has arisen within you by reading this parable, or about the criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees, or about your own awareness of yourself during your Lenten journey?

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