

Lent 4, 2010
Good Hope Lutheran Church
Luke 15

Grace mercy and peace be multiplied among you all in the knowledge of God, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, AMEN.

So here's the story: This rich old guy has two sons, ok. The older boy is so good it's almost unbelievable, but the younger son, eh, he's a problem child. Now this younger son wants a shot at dad's money, he wants a good time in life and he wants it now, so he says to his old man "Look pops. No offense. But you can't possibly die soon enough. Give me my share of the inheritance now, then I'm outta here and you can go on living as long as you want to for all I care." Sadly, the old gentleman gives his young son the money, which the kid promptly spends. Fun! For a while. He ran out. Hungry, humiliated, and a long long way from home, the prodigal soon hits bottom. He composes a nice little speech, and crawls back to dad to repent. And amazingly, incredibly, dad embraces him, forgives him, welcomes him home, and they all live happily ever after!—all of them that is, except maybe the unbelievably good older brother, who keeps saying over and over again It's not fair. It's just not fair.

So, applications, #1 and pretty obvious. We are that rude tacky younger son. Jesus is talking to us, and about us, we are the ones wasting the good

gifts of God. Heedless of our heavenly Father, forgetful of neighbor in need, we spend our lives doing little more than gratifying ourselves. Ignoring what is right and good and God-pleasing, we devote ourselves each day to what sounds quick, and easy; and fun. We are that prodigal, each and every one of us—and veteran Christians among us today, well, you've probably heard this sermon before, haven't you? And I have to admit I've *preached* this sermon before, there is after all an obvious connection here. Unfortunately, obvious does not mean easy, does it. I for one know full well I am that prodigal, and I can stand here and say that fine, no problem—and yet somehow I never get around to apologizing to anybody in particular; and I certainly never get around, to changing. We know we have bad habits, we know that most of our problems in life are of our own making, we know we are like that prodigal son, it's pretty obvious. But obvious does not mean easy, are we prepared to confess specific sins? Are we ready to let God in Christ make the changes that must be made?

Maybe not. In the story, the reckless boy was unable to do anything different till he hit rock bottom. Sitting there slopping hogs when a) he was Jewish and pigs were against his religion, and b) the pigs were eating better than he was; well there at that point he was finally able to admit the truth, and open himself to change. Do we have to bottom out too? Does life have

to get to that point before we're ready to turn it all over to God and let Him take charge? It may not be easy to confess, or to change, but it beats hitting bottom, and God has given you today. This moment, this opportunity, to begin the journey home. May we all do so.

#2. We are all the prodigal son, so let us be upfront in confessing our sins; then while we're at it, let's confess our false virtues too. Let's confess our false virtues, let's understand the *second* application of this parable, the many times the many ways we are that "unbelievably good" older brother. Evidently that older boy was born to be a hall monitor, checking up on everyone else. He's the one who likes to say "Yeah, I'm a sinner too. Nobody's perfect so I must be a sinner somehow too, only—I'm not as bad as you are. Obviously, I haven't sinned as much as you, so dad must love me more."

Now, we have to be careful with the older brothers of this world—after all, in the story, he is leading a good and decent life and Lord knows, he tries. But somehow, instead of being opened by his father's love, he's closed by it. His virtues isolate him, his goodness restricts him, instead of being opened by the father's love, he's been closed off. Aren't we too sometimes? We smirk and shake our heads at the convict who meets Christ in prison, "Yeah, sure, try to impress the parole board why don't you." You ever met someone

in prison, someone trying to re-build a life? Any of us escape our middle class cell blocks long enough to visit them in theirs? Some highly publicized sins in the world today—well thank God that's not me. Headline grabbing vices out there—don't worry Lord, I'm not like them. I've told some of you this before—there has been research done on the topic why people today do not attend church. You know one of the big reasons? One answer repeatedly given, why someone never ever walks through these doors: "I'm not good enough." "I'm not good enough, people who go to church are better than me." My fellow hall monitors: How on earth did we ever give them that impression? We're all in here because we're dying of sin, how can we give the impression to someone else that their sin is more serious than ours? What can and should we do to welcome folks in?

Finally, a word about dad. The father in the story—that would be God. We often call this the story of the prodigal son, when it could easily be called the parable of the prodigal dad. He just throws his love around, doesn't he? He throws it around like there no tomorrow, he squanders it, he lavishes it on the undeserving, doesn't the father know his young son could be lying? Isn't he aware this little repentance speech was practiced, and rehearsed, and could be a fib? Yep. He knows. He's not stupid. He is loving, and is willing to look and act foolish, in order to share that love.

In 1st Corinthians 1, St Paul talks about the cross of Jesus Christ, and Paul calls it “foolishness.” Foolishness—from any reasonable point of view, God dying on a cross to save people like us is foolish. It’s an act of love that rational minds question not only because it’s extreme—but also because it’s likely to be wasted, on people like us who, don’t really care. But you see, God *does* care, enough to send Jesus Christ to die and rise again for us. He loves us that much. And He always will.

So in closing I beseech you, in your life today, don’t let the Father’s love go to waste. Instead, in your life, let this be the day you begin the journey home. If you are the problem child. If you are the hall monitor. If you’re a bit of both. Don’t let the Father’s love go to waste, grasp hold of the cross of Christ and begin the journey home. And, don’t ever be afraid if it looks like the Father’s love is being wasted on someone else. Don’t worry if it seems God’s love is thrown around willy-nilly—in fact you go throw it around willy-nilly too. God’s got more, He’s not afraid to use it, so we don’t need to be afraid either. Not when you know, you too are loved by the Father, and will be forever; unto life everlasting, in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.