

Message for Sunday, March 30, 2025

Scripture: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Title: The Point

## **Welcome**

**Announcements:** Giving Options; Last week for Special Offering of Old Town Mission. Special offering for April will be UMCOR (there is a video)  
Angels Attic cancelled for next few weeks.

## **Fellowship of Love**

### **Song**

#### **Call to Worship**

L: Come all you faithful...

**P:...to worship, praise and pray.**

L: Come, all you unfaithful...

**P:...for God's love welcomes us home.**

L: Come into the presence of Christ....

**P: ...for Christ's grace makes us new and whole.**

## **Unison Prayer**

All: God of ages past and present faithfulness, welcome us into your love, as we worship you this day. Draw closer to us, that we might trust your promises and follow your ways. In hope and faith, we pray. Amen.

## **Scripture: Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32**

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable:

11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.

12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

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15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." '

20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

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31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

### **Message: The Point**

This is perhaps the longest and one of the most well known of Jesus’ parables. This story of the prodigal son is so well known that people who do not go to church even know what the word prodigal means, which basically means wasteful or spending lavishly. And almost everyone you talk to will talk as if they know what this scripture passage means. It is obvious that it is about repentance. Here is the thing, the context of the passage as well as the details of the story matter. Now we are not going to get into all the little details because I do not want us to miss the point of the passage, but we will talk about a few of them as we go along.

First, it serves us well to remember that this scripture passage comes from the book of Luke. In Luke, Jesus is the advocate of the poor. In fact, as I have made the case in other messages, it is clear in Luke that God favors the poor over everyone else. Our passage today is preceded by two other famous stories, one where the shepherd searches for a lost sheep, another where a person searches for a lost coin. Now the set up for these stories being told is that the Pharisees were grumbling who Jesus was eating with.

Having laid out this narrative context I want to move on to reviewing how many of us may have received this story in the past. If you are like me then there are two primary ways you have understood this story. This story is about repentance shown by the youngest son or this story is about acceptance by seeing what not to do from the oldest son. The problem with both of these interpretations is that they are insufficient.

Let us first refer back to the context the story is told in. The two parables before are about an individual finding something precious to them, the emphasis is on finding what is lost. The sheep does not repent, and the coin does not reject. So, while there is more complexity in the longer story I believe it is worthwhile thinking about this like story telling. We are putting these stories together because they share an emphasis. And that emphasis is not repentance.

Look at the story again, “But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one

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of your hired hands.” ” Luke 15:17-19 NRSV When we talk about repentance in the church context we talk about it as an action of seeing the wrong that you have done or participated in and making an intentional turn away from those actions. The youngest son does not show any signs of repentance. Of course, you would not know this by the sermons I have heard over my life. The youngest son just realizes if he does the bare minimum then he could have a life again. He is not sorry for what he did, he is not sorry for the insults he gave to his father, nor is he sorry for his wasteful spending. Instead, he is motivated by his belly. For all intents and purposes most pastors and theologians would not call this repentance. Instead, we might term it manipulation.

Then there is the second option, at the opposite end of the spectrum is the older brother. Those who interpret this passage as about the older brother are on better footing I think, but they still miss the main point. With this interpretation they look at the Pharisees making comments that are like the older brother, complaining about those who have repented, and that Jesus is spending time with. The story does a wonderful job at not resolving this particular issue. Since it is not resolved we do not know if the oldest son joins the party or not. Does he have a change of heart? This message is very valid as a caution to all of us. We can often be far more judgmental on people first showing up to church and answering Gods call than we often care to admit.

If neither of these are the point, then what is? The point of this story is the father. In the story of the lost sheep the focal point is the shepherd and the shepherds desire to find the lost one. In the story of the coin, it is the woman searching for the missing one. In this story the father does not begrudge the son for taking the inheritance no matter how insulting or underhanded it might have been to do so. The father essentially humiliates himself by running to his son. The language used here is the same type of language that calls to mind the story of David dancing before the Lord. Essentially it was the act of exposing high up on their legs...and potentially other body parts, which makes the act humiliating.

The father humiliates himself for the lost son but then does so for the oldest son as well. This is the part that is often missed by those who focus exclusively on the oldest son as a negative example. For the father to leave a party he is hosting, that he is throwing, and find someone of lesser stature, which the oldest still would not have been in as high esteem as the father, would have been just as humiliating. While it is good for us to see ourselves in either side of the story we miss the point if we do not see that it is the father who is seeking the sons. The father loves them enough to find them wherever they are and whether they really repent or not.

This is meant to focus us on Gods love and grace. It is not as much about redemption as it is to remind us that even that redemption is filtered through the grace

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and love of God! This focus is so easy to miss. We want to focus on what we should do, which is repent and mean it. Or we want to focus on having a better attitude to those who experience Gods redemptive grace later in life. Those are easy to focus on because we can tell who is doing them and who is not. Who measures up and who does not measure up. When we look at Gods love and grace first we have to acknowledge that none of us measure up to Gods capabilities. Not only that but we have to acknowledge that how God chooses to apply that love, and grace does not require our approval.

Now that last sentence I said is a difficult one for us to hear. “Pastor are you saying that God loves everyone no matter what?” Yes, yes I am. “Are you saying that we just have to accept who ever God wants to accept?” Yes, yes I am. It is better to try and err on the side of love and grace, which is what God does than it is to be either the oldest or youngest son. For some of you this idea brings great comfort. For others this is a struggle. We like to have limits, and the reality is with this story there are no limits to how humiliating God will be to show you how much he loves you.

The cross is the perfect example of this. The cross is humiliating. That is the whole point. It is through that humiliation that God shows us Gods love. Too many in our churches today want to see the cross as power, as a sign of manliness, as a sign of holding up our preconceived ideas a of who Christian’s are. But the cross and Gods love, and grace are humiliating. That is our model. That is what we are called to emulate, not the “repentance” of the younger son, and not the attitude of the older son, but the humiliating love of the father. Amen.

**Pastoral Prayer/Lord’s Prayer**

**Song**

**Benediction**

**Song**