

**Sermon Notes for 3/6/16 (Lent 4)**

**Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN**

**Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

**Theme: SELF-SACRIFICE ON BEHALF OF THE SELF-SERVING**

**Hymn: WOV 733 (Our Father, We Have Wandered)**

**The Point:** Our Lord's incredible grace is well-illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son so that we may grasp it and live by it always.

**Introduction:** Someone has written these perceptive lines: "Taken from its hive, the bee knows its way home and makes a 'bee line' back. An eel travels down the Rhine River to the sea and keeps right on till she reaches the Azores, lays her eggs, and dies. Her progeny return to the Rhine and the process is repeated. . . Salmon . . . leave the sea, enter fresh waters, and ascend far inland, deposit their eggs and die. . . Young salmon return to the briny deep, grow up, and then find their way up the very same river to pay their debt to their kind and to nature. . . In the spiritual nature of man there is that homing instinct. Something within says, 'Not here, not here, but back to God.' Have you returned?" (*Evangelical Beacon*)

Amazing love, amazing grace, back at home, at home with the Lord! This is the theme of today's Gospel lesson. We usually refer to it as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Some have suggested that it ought to be the Parable of the Prodigal Father. After all, the actions of the father are really the heart and core of this account, as we shall see. Let's examine this text on the basis of the theme SELF-SACRIFICE ON BEHALF OF THE SELF-SERVING.

Self-serving defines the actions and attitude of the younger son, at least initially. He wants to live life on his own terms. He hatches a plan to carry that out. He doesn't want to become indebted, so he declines to ask his father for a loan. He prefers to cut off connections with the father entirely. But of course, the wealth of the family belongs to the father. This son will not pilfer or steal the money – that might get him caught and discovered. So he goes to his father with a plan. I wonder whether the young man figured that this plan was so far-out, so ridiculous and hare-brained that it would never fly. But he proposes it anyway.

His appeal sounds this way: "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." In other words, he asks for his inheritance before the proper time. When is the proper time to get an inheritance? Of course, after the owner of the property has died. But this young man is not willing to wait. He says, in effect, "Father, I wish that you were dead and that I could carry on from there." Having a death wish for your father would be bad enough – to say it right to his face, well, that borders on the insane.

What he probably does not figure on is that the father would do it. Who of you would liquidate your assets and give half of it to a young, impetuous son? Maybe to a responsible daughter – but to an impulsive, reckless young man? This is the action of a father who loves far beyond our wildest imagination. If we looked purely at this one action, we might say this is not love, this is reckless foolishness. But this is the sort of reckless love this father willingly shows. So he takes the steps needed to give the son "his share" of the family wealth. He has his accountants and bankers and financial advisers figure out just what the family fortune amounts to. Then he has them liquidate half of it and gives the cash to his younger son.

Why is this father willing to take such drastic action? Perhaps he senses that he has already lost his relationship with this younger son. If the son is willing to wish him dead, what could remain of that relationship? This father is immensely wealthy – it seems that even doing away with half of his fortune does not force him to change his lifestyle. He still has the same servants and a similar lifestyle all the way through. But the wealth means nothing to him, if it means that he loses the connection with his son (or with his sons). So he sacrifices himself for the sake of this self-serving son. What would the older son

have thought of this activity? How about the wider family or the household or the townspeople? Don't you suppose the father would have been the target of more slander and innuendo than has been evident in the current presidential campaign? He laid his reputation on the line for the sake of this younger son.

And the son proves that the worst fears of the father and the others are well-founded. He could have made a comfortable living for himself and a considerable family and household with the tremendous wealth he had received. But he is centered on serving himself only. So he "gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living." We could easily write the script, couldn't we? Making friends with people who take advantage of him. Gambling in the games of chance that are available to him. Drinking himself into a stupor night after dreary night. Finding and using the latest recreational drugs. Perhaps even what his brother said, "devouring his property with prostitutes." Who knows how he chose to run through the wealth that his father had worked a lifetime to accumulate?! But soon enough it is gone. He is broke. No job, no home, no means of support, this young man is now a homeless wretch. Famine hits, and his former "friends" become invisible.

And worst of all, he "gloms onto" a citizen of that country, who desperately needs someone to feed his pigs. He is lower than low. A good Jewish boy hiring himself out to spend time in the pig sty. Jews won't eat pork, they won't raise pigs, they won't even touch pigs, lest they become ceremonially unclean. And this young man will be continuously unclean. Even if there had been a temple or a synagogue at hand, he would not be accepted there. No sacrifices, no prayers, no counseling with the local rabbi., no way to purify the guilt that burdens him. Isolated, not only from his family and friends, but from God also.

In his miserable, depressed condition, he still hangs onto faded memories from home. Servants in his father's household are far better off than he. They at least can count on three squares a day and a roof over their heads at night. So he figures out another path – still self-serving, but he has home back in his vision. He concocts a possible plan, better than the nothing he has now: "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 of your hired hands.'" The son is still self-serving. He indicates a willingness to be a servant, but only because that will get him far beyond where he is currently. He is willing to stoop, if it serves his self-interests. He heads for home – and what he expects will be a new level of servitude.

But the father's self-sacrifice has only begun. He has been watching and waiting for his son, his SON, to return. We don't know how long the boy has been gone – probably a number of months, maybe even years, depending on how long the money lasted. The father still waits. But now the watching and waiting of the father pays off. Amazingly enough, he sees the son trudging down the road toward the village. Now the father must move into action. He needs to get to the young man before the villagers see him and mistreat him or expel him or beat him, as they are likely to do.

The father does not take time to call and inform a servant to go out to meet the boy. He himself takes off and RUNS. That is self-sacrifice at its plainest. For an elder in a Middle Eastern village to run is a shameful thing. I was told by the surgeon some 5 years ago (after my ankle replacement) that I was no longer allowed to run or jump. I figured that, since I had become a grandfather 3 years prior to that, I could tolerate a life of no more basketball. I don't run. Middle Eastern grandfathers didn't have to wait for ankle surgery. They knew that running was a cultural "no-no." This father has to hoist up his robes in order to run – and in so doing he would show his legs, which is one of the most shameful acts of an elder. He sacrifices his reputation for the sake of greeting his son. Nothing is more important right now than getting to his son.

But this father's self-sacrifice does not end there. Now he also embraces this pig-dirt-stained, penniless, miserable rascal. The boy does not expect that. He starts to give his little rehearsed speech, but the father

cuts him off even before he can get to the suggestion of becoming a slave. “I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” he says. But of course, the father knows that. The thing is, he has NEVER been worthy of being called a son. You don’t get to be a son by a life of virtue and honesty. You get to be a son by the love of a father (OK, and a mother – just that a mother doesn’t come into this story directly). Self-sacrifice marks the father’s ongoing orders to the servants. “Get the best robe for my son, a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. And let’s have a party, even sacrificing the fatted calf. We have been saving that one for a special occasion. Nothing more special than a son coming home. Let’s party!” The family wealth will be put to work welcoming this wayward boy, who is still, above all else, a son.

Of course, we still have another son to deal with. The older son has been out in the field, working. Approaching the house, he hears music and the party going on. He refuses to go in. He will not participate after the slave tells him what is happening – that his brother is back home and is the cause of this celebration. The father loves this older son, too – not any less than his younger brother. He willingly lays down his life for this boy, too. He goes out to him.

Those who know Middle Eastern culture tell us that this is something a father would NEVER lower himself to do. But he goes out and “pleads with him.” Fathers should not need to plead with their sons. Sons should have as their highest calling the desire to please their father. But this son has also isolated himself. In his case it is not the obvious death wish directed to his father. He sees himself as much better than that younger son. Pride and arrogance and self-pity mark this son’s attitude.

Listen again to his speech. We are not told that it was rehearsed, but it sounds like it has been simmering in his mind and heart for a long time: “Listen! [no proper address to a father, harsh and arrogant as it is] For all these years I have been working like a slave for you [he sees his previous life as a slavery – this son is missing out on his father’s affection and love also], and I have never disobeyed your command [self-righteousness in the flesh]; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends [this one who has grown up with no worries and no cares still finds something to complain about, instead of being thankful]. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” [He cannot stand the thought that his father still wanted anything to do with this useless younger son! Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but this older son has missed the truth of this statement.]

The father tries to get through to his second (or first) prodigal son. His prodigal, reckless, wild love will not be satisfied with anything less than a fully reconciled relationship. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.” The household’s wealth belongs to the older son, just as it does to the father, who now holds nothing back. But celebration had to be the theme of the day because a dead, lost, unreconciled family member was now back home and within the father’s graces.

We have an unfinished story here. We don’t know how the older son might have responded. Did he yield to the father’s pleadings? Or was his heart hardened? One very feasible ending takes the second option. The older son, hardened against his father’s weakness, and especially feeling burnt because the father now had shamed the son, the family, the household and the entire village by his profligate love, picked up a rod and beat his father to death. He acted so as to absolve himself and the family of that father’s unjust, ill-advised actions in accepting a ne’er-do-well son. And of course, the younger son would have become a very unwelcome part of the household and the village.

**Conclusion:** Our Lord’s incredible grace is well-illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son so that we may grasp it and live by it always. The father in the parable does the kinds of things that our Savior has done for us and continues to do for us day by day. Jesus has sacrificed His life so that we could live

forever. And by His forgiveness, we have been accepted into the family as full inheritors of eternal life and of every other gift of the heavenly Father. We are recipients of the party thrown by the family's wealth, even the body and blood of the only-beloved Son spread before us this day. May that knowledge fill us so that we eagerly and willingly invite others, even those who have been far away from the Father's heart and home, to come home again and to know the embrace of the Father's welcoming arms, in the saving name of Jesus. AMEN!