

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

You recall that, a couple weeks ago, the Pharisees tried to derail Jesus from His duty: *“Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you”* (Luke 13:31). Jesus didn’t do what they wanted, but continued on the path the Father in heaven set before Him — to Jerusalem to die. That didn’t make them very happy.

The Pharisees’ and scribes’ displeasure with Jesus continues in today’s Gospel. What was Jesus’ offense this time? *“This man receives sinners [— tax collectors and sinners —] and eats with them.”* The Pharisee’s grumbling wouldn’t deter Jesus from what He came to do, even as it hadn’t before at the house of Levi. On that occasion, too, *“the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance’”* (Luke 5:30-32).

In today’s text, Jesus responded to the Pharisees grumbling with a series of three parables. Today, we consider the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son, and we’ll get to the details momentarily. But before we do, I want to be clear that repentance is in view in this parable — even though the word is nowhere to be found in the parable — just like it was explicitly in the two previous parables: *“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”* (Luke 15:7); and *“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents”* (Luke 15:10).

I emphasize this because I came across an article — “Is the parable of the prodigal son still relevant today?” — in, of all places, the New York Times. The article was penned some eight years ago by David Brooks — some of you may know him as the “conservative” commentator on the PBS Newshour. I’m surprised I missed it, but it sparked several responses online about the place of repentance. Brooks never mentions it; Rod Dreher of The American Conservative emphasized in critique “that the Prodigal Son repented in humility” (“Brooks, The Prodigal Son, And Humility,” The American Conservative, Feb. 18, 2014). Another Christian group who say they’re “devoted to connecting the Christian faith with the realities of everyday life” rejected Dreher’s emphasis. In typical neo-evangelical fashion, they ascribe repentance as a work of man, writing accusing Dreher of casting repentance “as our part of the equation of forgiveness” (“Lecturing the Prodigal Son(s) in The NY Times,” [mbird.com](http://mbird.com), Feb. 20, 2014). Thus, for them, repentance has nothing to do with Jesus’ parable.

And if it were true that repentance is our contribution to our salvation, they might have a point. But repentance is not primarily man’s work any more than faith is man’s

work — though man does the believing, or baptism is man’s work — though man is presented there at the font, or the Holy Supper is man’s work — though man comes forth, kneels, opens his hand or mouth, eats and drinks. No! Repentance is gift, as St. Peter proclaimed: *“God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins”* (Acts 5:31).

Let’s turn to the parable. Now, there are three main characters in the parable: two sons and the father. Moreover, it doesn’t take too much effort to understand that the father represents Jesus, the one welcoming sinners; the younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners; and the older son represents the Pharisees and religious authorities.

Let’s start with the father, who acts so outrageously with a wondrous love toward both sons. “What wondrous love is this, O my soul ... That caused the Lord of bliss To bear the dreadful curse for my soul” (LSB543:1). This is how God’s love was manifested: the Son was lifted up on a cross, through Christ, *“not counting [the world’s] trespasses against them,”* the Son becoming sin for us, that *“in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* (John 3:17). St. Paul says that this is why Jesus came: *“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”* (1 Tim. 1:15).

More than that, Jesus said in His encounter with Zacchaeus: *“the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”* (Luke 19:10). And so, in the parable, after the younger son had *“come to himself”* — sometimes translated *“come to his senses,”* but think “repented” — and was coming home, while the son *“was still a long way off,”* the father ran out to greet him. “What wondrous love is this!” He embraced His son and kissed him. He welcomed him back, not as a servant, but as a son! He clothed him with clean clothes — like we have been clothed with Christ in baptism. He hosted a feast to celebrate the return of his son — like we repentant sinners eat at the Lord’s table for our forgiveness. He rejoiced: *“my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”*

With the older son, the father is no different! Although this son was angry and unwilling to enter the feast, yet the father was not deterred. He came out to meet this son where he was and pleaded with him to come in to the feast. “What wondrous love is this!”

With regard to the sons, surely the younger son was a manifest sinner. He disrespected his father by asking for his inheritance — tantamount to wishing his father were dead — and then went off to a far country and squandered his inheritance in *“reckless living.”* He came to be in the depths of despair in that far

country, working with Gentiles, mucking around with pigs, so hungry that he wanted to eat their feed. If this younger son was any indication, these sinners Jesus was receiving were manifest sinners.

They had probably wondered: “Is there any hope of salvation for me? Can I be forgiven?” In Jesus, they had found hope. Out of the depths they surely cried to Him, much as the young son said to the father: “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.*” And Jesus’ ears were attentive to the voice of their supplication. As they turned to Him in repentance and faith, hearing this parable, they came to know that in Christ, the Lord did not keep a record of their sins, but that there was forgiveness with Him, that the Lord was a God of mercy, of steadfast love and plentiful redemption (Ps. 130).

Jesus is telling you the same thing today by this parable. There is no sin that has not been atoned for; there is no sin so egregious that it cannot be forgiven. Come to your senses; repent; hear Christ’s absolution: “My blood covers over all your sins” (1 John 1:7). You are forgiven for the sake of Jesus. You are restored. “*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called [not servants, but] children of God*” (1 John 3:1); and so we are in Christ!

There is another son, however, in this parable, the older son. He considered himself righteous. “*I never disobeyed your command,*” he said in perhaps willful blindness to the disrespect he also showed to his father as he accepted his inheritance before its time — and, the disrespect he was showing to his father right then with his grumbling.

What happens to him? He was entreated to come to the feast and celebrate the return of his lost brother — but he would not. Jesus ends the parable there. He showed no remorse, no repentance, and if the Pharisees he represents are any indication, he never did. He didn’t think he needed repentance. He resisted his father’s invitation to the end and found himself forever severed from the Lord’s banquet table.

David Brooks, in his article, wanted to “apply the father’s wisdom to social policymaking today.” But it’s not the father’s wisdom that is on display, or His justice, but the father’s love. And Jesus isn’t telling this parable as a model of “social policymaking.” He is telling it that we might reflect on our own sin, and our own attitudes about our need for repentance, and then with our own “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you*” on our lips, that we might revel in the love of God in Christ Jesus, the redemption He won for us in Christ, the forgiveness He bestows by Word and Sacrament, the hope we have of the heavenly feast that awaits us (Is. 25:6), and the rejoicing here and in heaven for us sinners who repent.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.