

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We have set before us today a sumptuous feast of a parable. It's often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is, as Dr. Art Just called it, “[p]erhaps the most beloved of Jesus’ parables and one of the most cherished passages of Sacred Scripture” (Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Concordia Commentary: Luke 9:51–24:53*, 594).

The name suggests a focus on the younger son who “*squandered [the inheritance given him] in reckless [extravagant] living.*” And he is an important character in this parable, but he is not the most important one. Another character in the parable is the elder son; yet, perhaps for many, he’s just part of a brief and unimportant epilog to the parable. To be sure, he’s not the most important character either.

The parable has two parts: the younger son figures in the first part; the elder son in the second part; but the father has a role in both parts. In fact, he’s the main character in this parable, a parable that answers the question: who, in the end, will recline at table with Jesus in the kingdom of God?

Briefly ... it’s not everyone. To be sure, “*God our Savior ... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim. 2:3-4). “*The Lord ... [does not wish] that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Pet. 3:9). But we know that not all will be saved. Jesus says, “*many, I tell you, will seek to enter [into salvation] and will not be able*” (Luke 13:24). Jesus will say to those standing on the outside, locked out: “*I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil*” (Luke 13:27). He says to us: “*people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last*” (Luke 13:29-30).

Similarly, a bit later, Jesus taught: “*when you are invited [to the wedding feast], go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted*” (Luke 14:10-11).

These teachings of Jesus precede His preaching of the parables in chapter 15, including the parable before us today. They serve to highlight the context of these parables. Two groups of people are set against each other, with Jesus in the middle. There are “*the tax collectors and sinners*” on the one side, who “*were all drawing near to hear [Jesus].*” And there are “*the Pharisees and the scribes*” on the other side, who were grumbling at Jesus because He “*receives sinners and eats with them.*” Clearly, the younger son in the parable represents the tax collectors and sinners, and the elder son represents the Pharisees and scribes. And the parable

explores: who will celebrate at the feast, that is, who, in the end, will recline at table with Jesus in the kingdom of God?

Surely, the younger son was the manifest sinner. How outrageous was his behavior! How disrespectful! How callous! He asked his father for his inheritance, even though his father was still living. How gracious is his father! To everyone's surprise, his father gave it to him; then the younger son went off and engaged in manifest sin, riotous living, squandering the inheritance.

Moreover, circumstances changed. A famine came, and young son was destitute. He had to seek a job, and he got one from a Gentile pig farmer, taking care of the pigs. As bad as that was for a Jew — after all, pigs are unclean animals to the Jews — he was so bad off that he became hungry enough to want to eat with the pigs, to eat the pods they fed on.

It's sad, but often true, that we too need such dire circumstances to bring about the humility to which Jesus calls us ... afflicted that He might heal us ... brought to grief that He might show us compassion (Lam. 3:32-33). It's as the writer to the Hebrews says: "*My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. 'It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons'*" (Heb. 12:5-7).

Indeed, the young son, having been brought low, came to his senses and purposed to return to his father in humility. "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.*"

Surely, there we see contrition — as we heard last Sunday, the first part of repentance — but do we see faith in the goodness of his father? For remember, repentance also includes faith that believes in sins forgiven because of Christ. The young son sought more of a bargain with the father, not his grace. No, it was not quite repentance, ... not yet, not until he experienced that goodness.

The younger son did as he had purposed. He approached home, and his father surprised again. Filled with compassion, he ran out to meet his son. He embraced his son; he kissed him. He restored him as a son, putting a robe on him, a ring on his finger, and shoes on his feet. The son started to say the words he had rehearsed, but he couldn't finish, not with this kind of reception. He needed no bargain with his father; he needed only the father's grace. The young son, the manifest sinner, but humbled finally to repentance, would be exalted. He would come to the feast the father had prepared. "*[M]y son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.*"

The elder son, on the other hand By all outward appearances, he was the respectful son, the obedient son, the faithful son, but not by the inner reality. The elder son heard the celebration, the “*music and dancing,*” and asked, “What is going on?” He was told about the return of his brother, but his heart was as cold as ice. Instead of rejoicing at the return, he became angry and lashed out at his father.

The father came to him, too. He tried to explain his grace. This son would not hear it. The father entreated this son to come to the feast; he refused. Worse, he accused the father of being unfair — “you never threw a party for me and my friends”; he accused the father of being a chump . . . a fool for welcoming that low life “*son of yours*” back into his life. The father, patient with this son, still hopeful, pleaded with him again: “*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*” This feast is for you, too. The occasion for the celebration is the return of your brother, dead but living again, lost but now found. Please come to the feast.

Did he? Did the elder son come to the feast? Did he rejoice with his father and brother? Jesus doesn’t answer. He leaves the parable hanging. This parable was His invitation to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes. Would they come?

Some did. Some bravely followed Jesus in humility and faith — I’m thinking Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Most did not, but had Jesus nailed to a tree, thus fulfilling Caiaphas’ prophetic words. How profitable it was that this one man Jesus should die! Profitable, indeed. His death was the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. God has reconciled the world to Himself through the sinless Christ who became sin for us and took on sin’s punishment for us by this sacrifice. Forgiveness and salvation are now offered up to us as gifts from the Father through faith in Christ Jesus. And Jesus’ life is now the narrow gate through which we, who are last, pass unto everlasting life and become first in the kingdom of God.

“God loved the world,” we just sang. This parable illustrates this love, for the invitation goes out to all, tax collectors, sinners, Jews, and Gentiles. Come to the feast. May we RSVP “yes” to the invitation with trust in the goodness of God. Come, then, in humility and faith; come to be exalted. Come in the righteousness Christ won for you and has bestowed upon you. Come and recline at table with Him — today we “recline” at this altar where He feeds us His body and blood for our forgiveness and life — one day soon we will recline with Jesus at His eternal banquet in the kingdom of God. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

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