

Sermon Notes – March 30, 2025
The Holy Gospel of St. Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32
Peace Lutheran Church

“Happy Are Those Who Are Forgiven”

Luke 15 includes three parables with similar meanings, all springing from a single situation - the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes against Jesus' welcoming of tax collectors and sinners. The first two parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (omitted from today's reading but saved for September 14) are straightforward stories of beloved possessions lost, sought for, and found, and of the communal rejoicing that follows their return. The final extended drama, however, includes all of these and more.

The story of the prodigal son is the longest and psychologically richest parable in the gospels. The youngest son cuts himself off from the family, demands his inheritance (as if his father were already dead), and then runs through it, so that when the famine comes, he can feed neither himself nor his companions - the opposite of the communal rejoicing in the shorter parables. He reaches the lowest state a Jew can, caring for pigs, and only then does he turn towards home, rehearsing a speech that he hopes will allow him to reenter his father's house as a slave. But upon his return and before he can get the speech out, however, his father greets him with compassion and welcomes him with another of the chapter's communal parties. Refusing to enter the party, however, is the elder son, who describes himself as the slave that the younger son was willing to become. He is a mirror of the Pharisees and scribes, who believe that they have followed all the commands and therefore have no need to repent, and who refuse to join the rejoicing of heaven upon the return of their wayward siblings.

Among the many lessons in this passage (fruitfully explored by asking how we embody each of the characters) is the year's theme of how God uses suffering. Without the famine and his spendthrift ways, the younger son might not have turned toward home. Suffering can make it clear that other “gods” upon whom we have depended cannot keep their ultimate promises.

The reading recounts a dangerous yet essential point in the life of Israel. For forty years they had depended on God's miraculously provided manna for their daily sustenance. Now they have entered the land they

had been promised, and that provision has ended. They will receive their food from the land - still from the hand of God, but less obviously so, and it will be easy for them to think that their own labor has won the land and its nourishment.

The second reading immediately precedes the verse we heard on Ash Wednesday. When we are justified, not only are we ourselves made new, but we see all creation in a new way. No one - neither Pharisee nor scribe, nor tax collector or sinner, nor older or younger son - is bound by our earlier perceptions of them. We can see their pain and disappointment, their opportunities and delusions, as clearly as the father of the prodigal son sees them, and treat them with the same generosity, understanding, and compassion.