

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

03/31/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.]

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

³So he told them this parable: ^{11b}“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up

and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for 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. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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 Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The Prodigal Son

Good morning! The Prodigal Son! It's a Christian classic! If you're not familiar with the story then you have at least heard the expression. In fact, every time I go home my father exclaims "Ah! The prodigal son returns!" At some point in high school someone had the worst possible idea for teaching the 100ish students at Camp Luther about this biblical story and for over an hour Pastor Ron Schlack talked about Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son's return. Can you imagine a group of teenagers sitting through an art lecture in the middle of June in West Virginia in a barn that had been converted into a meeting space? It was a horrible idea, and yet, for some strange reason, I was enthralled.

From the 8th grade through my senior year of high school, I took art as an elective every year. Something about the painting drew me in. I don't know if it was Rembrandt's mastery of light, or the father's embrace, maybe it was the poverty and need of the son that was so captivating. Or maybe it was the brother's frustration in the background, fading into the darkness... whatever it was, it made the text come alive in a completely new way for me.

I had always felt like the prodigal son. My brother and sister both work in the family business, but during that time in my life I had no idea what I wanted to do. Only one thing was for sure, I had NO desire to take over the family business. I was also a horrible student, and so I felt very much like the outsider, not fitting in and not

welcome. We've probably all felt like that in our life. In fact, one of the reasons this text is so popular is that we can all identify with prodigal son. We've all run away from a problem at one point or another, and we've all desired to be welcomed back where we most feel loved. But there's only one problem with this; we're not the prodigal son in this story... we're the elder son!

Let me explain. This is a story for the outcast, the ones that society has kicked to the side. But the role of the eldest son is a representation for those that are already a part of the community, specifically the church. It's a wonderfully Lutheran text! The prodigal son is given everything he doesn't deserve and more simply because the father loves him. It's a story of grace. Just as God has loved us even though we sin time and time again, God welcomes us with open arms when we return, bestowing blessings upon us, covering our sin with a coat of forgiveness and mercy, washing us in the waters of baptism, bestowing a ring of love upon our finger, and inviting us to the table for the joy that the sacrament offers us.

We've already been welcomed, and so it's our turn to make sure someone else has a place in God's arms, at God's table. Which is pretty hard for us Americans, if I'm honest. We live in a country where we tell ourselves that the strong survive, that those who work the hardest get the most. If you don't put in the effort, you don't get the reward. Our past is the story of immigrants sailing to this country, starting with nothing, and literally conquering the wilderness. We like to imagine that we "deserve" the best as long as we work the hardest. And what do we hear in the text? It's not about us at all! We have done our work and that's great, but the one who was lost has returned! Those

who had been forgotten have been found, and the family has been strengthened because of it.

For Lent we have been reading the book *I Am a Church Member* by Thom S. Rainer. Each chapter is only around 10 pages and it's full of wonderful challenges for the body of Christ. It begins by highlighting the two very different definitions of the word "member." The first he calls the country club idea. That when we become members of a congregation we think it comes with certain benefits and entitlement. This type of outlook only serves to hurt the congregation. The second definition is more in line with what it means to be a congregational member. We function as members of the body, we all serve a specific function and it's our effort together that makes the whole thing work. None is more important than another, and by our very existence we are designed to function AS a member of that body.

And so the book is full of wonderful challenges that make you look at life in the church much differently. Rainer says things like: *"Membership is about receiving instead of giving, being served instead of serving, rights instead of responsibilities, and entitlement instead of sacrifice."*¹ And *"God did not give us local churches to become country clubs where membership means we have privileges and perks. He placed us in churches to serve, to care for others, to pray for leaders, to learn, to teach, to give, and, in some cases, to die for the sake of the gospel."*² and then this past week in chapter three he had this wonderful little quote: *"but the strange thing about church membership is that you actually give up your preferences when you join. Don't get me*

¹Rainer, Thom S. *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes the Difference*. Nashville, Tenn: B & H Pub. Group, 2013. p. 11.

² *ibid.* p. 6.

wrong; there may be much about your church that you like a lot. But you are there to meet the needs of others. You are there to serve others. You are there to give. You are there to sacrifice. Get the picture?"³

Being a church member isn't easy, and it's so tempting to act like the eldest son, frustrated and angry that we haven't received the same reward, but when we think like that we forget that we give because God has already give us so much! Grace has set us free to love with abandon because we have been loved already! God has called us from across time and space to this very space to be a servant that shows God's very own compassion and love to those who have been forgotten.

In just a few short weeks we will hear the story of Jesus Christ entering Jerusalem and the whole world will be turned upside down. It's that life, that witness, and ultimately that death that enables us to put aside thoughts like the eldest son, and start acting like the loving father who welcomes us all. Amen.

³ *ibid.* p. 34.