

Sermon Trinity 3 2021

June 20, 2021

Luke 15:11-32

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read; the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In reflecting on this parable this week, I realized that I've had a theme that's come up a couple of times in the sermons over the past few months, and that's the theme of necessity. I spoke about it last week in connection with the necessity of the Lord's house and feast being filled eternally, and I spoke about it on Easter in connection with the necessity that Jesus would rise from the dead. Now, to be clear, those are different words in the Greek that relate to that necessity, and I'm not going to delineate the difference, partially because I'm not sure I could, and mostly because the point can be seen without it: there is a necessity that happens when it comes to God. We see that same necessity in this parable too. Where, you might ask? In the end where it said, **"It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."**

Now, you might hear that and say, "what is it saying is necessary? I don't hear necessity in that sentence." And as it's translated you don't, but it's in the word "fitting." That word is the word for necessity flowing from the working of God. It's happening or it's going to happen because of a divine necessity. So, on Easter I described this word saying that it was necessary that Christ would rise from the dead. It had to happen that Christ would rise from the dead. In the same way, it's not just fitting that there is this celebration. It has to happen. The father in the story is saying that it's almost like he couldn't not celebrate. This son came back from the dead. This son was lost and now is found. There HAS to be a celebration for this.

And this fits the chapter, if you know it. It fits the rejoicing you see in the first ten verses of Luke 15. If you know that chapter, you know that it starts with the parable of the lost sheep. There are the ninety-nine that the shepherd has a location on, but the one is lost. So, he goes searching until he finds it, then he rejoices. And the lost coin. The woman can't find the coin, so she tears apart her house, she sweeps the floor over and again, and when she finds it, what happens? She rejoices. There's the rejoicing over the coin, there's rejoicing over the sheep. And there's rejoicing over the brother.

And why does the chapter tell us there is rejoicing? Because it's like the rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. So, you have the sinner, you have that lost sheep,

that coin, that prodigal son, they are lost and then found. And when they are found there is rejoicing. In the case of that father in the parable, there has to be this rejoicing. It's necessary. It can't not happen.

Now, as we say that, we should take a step back and ask more of what that really means. Obviously, this is like the Lord's joy at the repentance of the sinner, but what does that tell us about God? Think about it. What do you learn from God that He tells you that when a sinner repents that it is necessary that there be this celebration? You learn that God deeply, deeply wants sinners to repent. He wants it so badly that it is impossible for Him not to rejoice at their repentance. And why that necessary? Well, we could take that a lot of directions, but if you watch my devotions, you heard me talk about the Hebrew term for it. I've spoken of this term before, but you see it in both Old Testament lessons for this week. It's the word *hesed*, translated steadfast love.

Hear again how the Old Testament lesson says it: **“He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.”** Why is it necessary that there be this rejoicing, this celebrating? Because God delights in steadfast love, in *hesed*. And Christians, that love is immense. I think we can't understand just how immense it is. In fact, that's why I talk about how deep our sin is often. That's why I make the point of our sin. It's so that we can contrast our sin with the *hesed* of God and we can see just how immense that love is.

So, if I may make that point now. You know, we're looking at the parable of the prodigal son, and we think about how this son goes out and wastes this gift given to him. And we look at the story, and this is sort of like the story of an addict, isn't it? He's living it up, and all of a sudden it gets bad with the famine. He's out of money, and he's got to find a way to get by. So, he humbles himself to go to work. And to be clear, Jesus is making a point about that work being lowly. This guy is not just working on a farm, he's working on a pig farm. You've got to remember as common as pig farms are and as much as we love sausage and pork chops and bacon, to these Jewish ears, this man going to serve pigs would be low. He not only has to be in contact with them, but he's feeding them. And then it gets worse. The famine is so bad that the guy wishes he could even eat the pigs' food. He's jealous of these filthy, unclean beasts. I say this is like the story of an addict, because the point is that the guy hits what we talk about with addicts when we talk about rock bottom. This guy hits rock bottom. And obviously, that's us in our sin. Isn't it? And yet there's this love of God.

As I started to say, to make the point concrete in our day, I look at something like what we've been talking about in Sunday morning Bible Class, something I've mentioned a couple of times in sermons, and that's what's being called Critical Theory. Critical

Theory looks at the world and it sees issues—many of them real issues. Issues like racism and people being mistreated because of their race or nationality. It looks at the mistreatment of other peoples too, within this breaking people’s identities down to race, sex, gender, sexuality, ability, weight even. It divides the world into all these categories and it says in each category there are those who have tried to create normalcy by their values within these identities and so have oppressed others who weren’t of that normal. So, whites have oppressed other races, heterosexuals have oppressed any other sexuality. People who see themselves as the gender of their birth sex have oppressed other genders, and so on down the line. Again, it’s not that there hasn’t been mistreatment within these categories in places and times. And sometimes in very harsh and real way. It’s not to say that there aren’t still ways that this happens. But as we’re talking about sinfulness, we can draw a major critique of Critical Theory, actually two, that show how we’re messing the solution up in our sin.

The first is this division of all peoples that this creates between oppressor and oppressed. The true issue is that we are all oppressed under sin, under death, and under the power of the devil. And we’re united in that. To deny that and divide ourselves distracts us from the reality that these are our common enemies. As Jesus said, a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. And this is only worsened when the confession of our sins under the law of God is considered a problem. That’s the first critique is this division—and you see this increasing I think.

The second is that there has become an assumption that this reality of oppressor versus oppressed is the primary reality that one can liken to a religious devotion. I was reading a book about this this week and it made this point. In fact, this book wasn’t even written by Christians but it made the observation of what an ideological problem this has created. There is such devotion to this perspective that if you push against it, you are treated as, in essence, being a heretic who deserves what heretics deserve. It said that questions are allowed if they’re for seeking understanding in further grasping this oppressor versus oppressed dialectic. If questions are asked because it’s not being believed, then you are seen as a part of the problem and you have to be attacked.

What’s my point? My point is that as God is missing from that perspective, as the things of God like mercy and grace and unity and love are missing from that perspective, it becomes messier. And that shows how sinful we are as people that we mess this up so much. And yet this *hesed* of God is so immense that He still loves us in the midst of it. He still finds it necessary in that love to rejoice when there is repentance.

Or, I’m thinking most of us don’t have that mindset, so to bring it to our own hearts, look at our own sin. Look at yourself and the ways you sin. Look at the ways you try to

justify your sin. And be honest about it. In fact, think of the security you have in this *hesed* to be honest about it. You know I watch even how children struggle with this. You call a child out on how their wrong and their first reaction is to explain it away, to justify themselves somehow. It's like Adam in the garden isn't it? You say, "Billy, don't hit your sister." And what's the response? "She started it!" "It's not my fault! It's the woman you gave me!" Right? And we're all that way. We all try to minimize our sin. We all try to pretend like we know that we're bad, but maybe we're not *THAT* bad. "Yes I'm a sinner, but I'm not *THAT* sinner. I'm not Hitler, I'm not Dahmer, I'm not a murderer or a child molester." And we see how quickly we can actually identify with the older brother in the parable, don't we? And yet look at the love of the father toward that son. "**Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.**" "Son, I have this same love for you, come to this feast and celebrate too!"

And as I say that look at how Paul exemplifies this. You know, here's Paul, the self-righteous of the self-righteous. Elsewhere he tells of the confidence he could have in his human goodness. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that with Judah had remained faithful. He was circumcised on the eighth day, and he was zealous. And yet all of that was loss, all of that was literally manure (actually the translation would be more akin to a word I'm not going to say from the pulpit because it would offend many of you, but that's what Paul calls it), manure for the sake of knowing Christ. This love of the Father frees Paul to say that. Or look in this passage. As Paul speaks about the horridness of persecuting the Church, this *hesed* frees him to call himself the chief of sinners. As he says, "**The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.**" That's Paul, the Paul we all respect and admire because of his dedication to the faith, but he sees himself as foremost of sinners. And notice it's not "of whom I *WAS* the foremost." No, it's "of whom I *AM* the foremost."

Christians, that love is the same love for you. That love is the love shown to you in this cross of Jesus. The cross of God's *hesed* winning the forgiveness of your sins. The cross of every sin you know about, every sin you try to justify, every sin you try to minimize, every sin that you don't even know, all of that crucified and buried in His tomb that you would have life in His resurrection. And that you would truly know that for your own life, in that same *hesed*, the Father has joined you to that death and resurrection in baptism. He has fed you with that cross in the Holy Supper. He has bespoken you freed from that sin in His Gospel, that forgiveness in your ears. And He has done all of this because He wants to rejoice with you. He wants you to repent, and as you do daily, He rejoices daily. He has to. It's necessary for Him to. He loves you that much. Amen.