

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

Now three parties were present as Jesus told the parables in the fifteenth chapter of Luke, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. All three stories should really be considered as one unit, as parts of the same story. And the three parties who were listening were the religious party including Pharisees and scribes, the sinners including the tax-collectors, and Jesus. We have here the “found,” the “lost,” and Jesus, all three appear in each parable, and the parables progress from the first dealing with animals, the second with lifeless coins, and the third with people walking and talking on the stage.

Our parable this morning begins with “There was a man who had two sons.” We often think of the younger son in this parable as standing outside his father’s house and family, in the same way we often think of the older son in this parable as having somewhat of a hold within his father’s house and family. But actually, both are equally present from the first moment, and both stand outside the household and the family.

From the beginning of the parable the unthinkable happens. In Middle Eastern culture, with the same understandings today that were in place as Jesus told these parables, the request from the younger son would never happen and if it did the father would have been very angry and refused. In Middle Eastern understanding, the request from the younger son means that he wants his father to die. In a theological sense we can say that Jesus is affirming that mankind in their rebellion against God wants him dead.

The younger son, driven by self-centered pride, ungrateful, demanding privilege but not responsibility, rejects the father’s love. Again in Middle Eastern culture the recipient of property is duty bound to administer it and “build the house of his father,” but he doesn’t and cuts himself off from his roots. In the Middle East a man’s security is his family, as precious as life itself, family is social security, insurance and pension, assurance of marriage, physical and emotional wellbeing. In other words, in the Middle East family is everything. In the same way, God our Father offers the deepest security to believers, the family or household of God.

The older son knows the entire story, his should be the role of mediator between his father and his younger brother, but he refuses his role. In the Middle Eastern family personal relationships are supreme, even if he hated his brother he should always fulfill this task for the sake of his father.

The father grants freedom even to turn away from him, even as God the Father gives us freedom even to reject his love. Jesus presents this picture of the father in the parable which should shape our image of God, our heavenly Father.

Now as we know, things didn't work out for the younger son, he disgraces himself from the get go, requesting his inheritance, selling it and then squandering it. Note now that as he comes to himself, he doesn't repent, instead he plots as to how to get back into his father's good graces. There is no repentance here. But now see what the father does, our gospel says "he ran" and in Middle Eastern culture no family patriarch would have debase himself by running. But actually the word "ran" is better translated as "raced", it's not a fast walk, shuffle or jog, not even running, but racing. In his compassion he races to his son and knowing his son will shortly face the shame and humiliation of the village people, he takes it upon himself. Even this parable can't capture the mystery and wonder of God in Christ, but here we begin to understand as best we can, our God. The father, understood now to be Jesus, races to his son in an act of reconciliation through which no one can despise or reject his younger son. He kissed his son, the word is perhaps better understood as either kissed again and again or kissed tenderly. His son is stunned and unable to finish his planned speech, changing his mind, he accepts being found. He accepts being found! And this is the definition of repentance that Jesus brings out in the parable of the lost sheep.

The older son hears from a slave probably better translated as a young boy, that his father has received a sinner and is in the process of sitting down and eating with him. He's upset and he has the same complaint as the Pharisees against Jesus. Now consider that the father has divided everything between his two sons, the property now in the house belongs to the older son although the father has the authority. But now the older son refuses to go in, a public rebellion because everyone is waiting for the banquet to begin. And the father, willing to endure shame and self-emptying love for the sake of reconciliation with his older son, has done the unexpected again.

The messianic banquet has begun my friends, all who accept the Father's love are his guests. Costly love has been offered to us to restore you and I brothers and sisters, to the Father's family. Whether you identify with the younger son, or the older son, God has done it all, and for us, we accept being found.

AMEN