

March 14, 2010
Lent 4

"Jesus Love for the Lost"

LUKE 15

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ...¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Do you see that house over there? There is something really bad going on over there. Jesus is entering that house. He is sitting down to eat with tax collectors and sinners. He is talking to them as if they were his best friends. How can he be the Messiah? How can he claim to be God's Son? It says in the words we just read that these religious leaders and Pharisees 'muttered' about Jesus. To mutter means say something bad quietly under your breath so nobody hears you. Jesus knew what these religious leaders were saying about him. He heard and saw their muttering.

To help these religious leaders understand why he had come into the world Jesus told three stories about losing something important. Each one of these stories Jesus told has an element of exaggeration to drive home the point. A shepherd loses one of his sheep. He leaves the 99 sheep and goes after the one sheep. How strange was that? A woman loses a coin and searches at night with a lamp to find it instead of waiting the next morning until it was light and much easier to search for something that was lost. A father welcomes home a wayward son with open arms and throws a feast of all feasts. Each story was intended to show to the extreme how much Jesus and his heavenly Father care for people who were lost.

Today we want to focus on this story of a father's love for his lost son. It's really the story of a father's love for two lost sons. The one son was lost in his rebellion against his father and his God. The other son was lost in his self-righteous attitude that refused to welcome home his rebellious brother.

He reached out to the tax collectors and sinners

A man had two sons. The younger son goes to his father and demands that his father give him the portion of his inheritance. Occasionally you hear of families where kids talk about dividing the inheritance before Mom or Dad dies, but this takes the cake. This son demands his portion from his dad before his dad dies. Even more strange the father goes along with the request and gives half the money to the youngest son and gives the farm to the other son. I don't know about you, but I would be very reluctant to give any money to a son with such an attitude as that. Yet the father gave him his portion of the inheritance.

You know what happens next. The younger son takes the money, goes off into a distant country and squanders it in wild living. He gets as far away from his family as possible. He wants to do his own thing. He throws the big parties. He buys the expensive clothes. He runs up huge bills. Fair weather friends leach off the man with the big bucks.

Then the times change. "There was a severe famine in the whole country and he began to be in need." The times changed. They always do. People were out of jobs. The high roller had to settle for a job feeding pigs. "He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything." When you are really hungry you start thinking about food all the time. You even dream about it at night when you sleep. He dreamt of the nice meals he had when he was home with family. He hungered for food and hungered more for the love that was so generously bestowed on him by his loving father.

When my son Joel was four years old, we asked him what he learned in Sunday school that day from Mrs. Hansen, who was his Sunday school teacher. He said, "We learned about the pig man." And then he filled in some of the things he learned about the pig man.

It says that this pig man came to his senses. He started to formulate a plan. Maybe I can go home and offer to be one of my father's hired servants. He knew the servants had more than enough to eat from his generous father. If he worked hard there might be an opportunity to earn back the love he lost.

He comes home from the far off country. He left looking like a prince but now he is a

pauper, barefoot and wearing clothes that are rags. He is nothing but skin and bones. The roads and homes and farms become more familiar as he gets closer to home. He rehearses over and over again what he will say to his father with the hope that his father will show him just a little compassion and mercy. He crests the hill. The family farm is now in view. A pair of eyes is looking at this gaunt shell of a man coming down the hill. They are the eyes of a father who dearly loves him. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him." The way Jesus tells the story he wants us to draw the conclusion that the father spent a lot of time looking up at that road, hoping to see his son return. I think of all the parents I have known who have joined that father, yearning and praying for their dear children to come back to the loving arms of a heavenly Father who sent his Son Jesus to die for them.

Jesus knows how to touch hearts with his teaching about his heavenly Father's love for us. "(The father) ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." The father runs down the road. He wraps his loving arms around his son. He squeezes him so tightly his son can hardly breathe. He kisses his son. Tears of joy stream down the dad's face. The son feels the body of his father heaving and convulsing with uncontrollable joy. There is nothing more beautiful than love that convulses out of control and knows no limits in its unrestrained compassion.

"Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Jesus is such a good story teller. He shows us the father calling to his servants, "Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him." It's the best robe, not just the robe they were ready to give to the Good Will Store. "Put a ring on his finger." Jesus leaves us wondering what kind of ring that might be. Was it a gold ring, or even a signet ring that symbolized ownership? And then there was the fattened calf. Was that the calf the family farm was ready to sell at high price for someone's wedding, or the fattened calf saved for a special occasion? The father wants a feast of all feasts with music and dancing. "For this son of man was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." What a contrast! What a striking contrast! The son loses the family fortune. The father loses himself in love for his son who was lost.

The exaggerations of love that Jesus sets forth in this story of the father's love for his lost son do not even begin to compare to the greater love that our heavenly Father has for people like us who were once dead and lost in sin. Jesus told a man named Nicodemus about this love with these words. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting love."

The time may be coming in your life when you will be happy to eat the food the pigs eat and nobody will give anything to you. The worst of times can be the best of times. Everything can be taken away from you. You can suffer horrible as Job once did. But then the Lord brings you to your senses. He brings you home. He reminds you that your Father has loved you so much that he gave you his only begotten Son, just for you. I am convinced that if Adam and Eve had never sinned and all their descendants had never sinned, and I was the only person to ever turn my back on my God, he would have sent his Son, just for me. My Father lets me see with my eyes of faith the blood of Jesus pouring down his body and he assures me that his blood cleanses me from all sin. He lets me feel the beautiful robe of Jesus righteousness wrapped around me. He lets me wake up every morning knowing there is a seal of ownership more important than a ring on my finger.

He assures me, "You have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Jesus amazing story is about exaggerated love. And that is what the Bible is all about. It is about Jesus' love for sinners that leads him to give his life for us that he might bring us home to our Father so we can live every day in the superabundant luxury of his life.

He reaches out to the religious self-righteous

Earlier I said this is the story of two lost sons. It is the story of a lost son who comes to his father, and another son who is lost because he does not share the father's love for his brother. The older brother was probably off on some business trip. He comes home and hears the music and the dancing. He asks the servants what was going on. You can hear the excitement in their voices as they say, "Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." It would have been hard enough for this son to accept the fact his father had welcomed his brother home with open arms. How could he throw a feast? How could he kill the fattened calf? He stalks away in anger and rage.

Notice the father, the loving father, as he pursues this second son who was lost in his self righteous indignation. The father listens to this lost son pour out his anger. "I have been slaving for you." "I never disobeyed your orders." "You never even gave me a goat." "This son of yours squandered your property." Perhaps you have seen similar jealous anger, maybe even in members of your own family or even in yourself. The father reaches out in love. "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

How long will it be before the older brother finally joins the singing and dancing and sits down to enjoy the succulent meat from the fattened calf? Will he exclude himself from the party because he cannot be part of his father's love for a lost son? God forbid that I should ever join that son and mutter with the Pharisees, "How could Jesus ever accept a person like that? Just look at what they have done!" Jesus loves the lost with an exaggerated love. He is the Shepherd who leaves the 99 and goes after the one lost sheep. He is the woman who takes a light and searches all night in the dark for a lost coin. He is the father who even kills the fattened calf to celebrate the return of a lost son. Jesus, help me be like you in my love for the lost. Amen.