

Lent4C (3/14/10 – *Behold, the Son of God, Who Makes Himself the Prodigal Son for You*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

*Lent* is a time of reflection and repentance – and, above all, of focus on the redemption purchased for us by Christ. In the *Holy Gospel* appointed for this *Fourth Sunday in Lent*, we see two sons who need to reflect on their sin, repent of it, and turn to the redemption that comes only in our Savior Jesus Christ. This parable that our Lord sets before us is widely known as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. A more descriptive title might be, *The Parable of the Prodigal and Proud Sons and Their Compassionate Father*. But let's not quibble about man-made titles for this Word of God – instead, let us hear it, mark it well, learn from it, and inwardly digest it.

We need to consider exactly what transpires in this parable of our Savior. The younger son's request is actually worse than it might seem at first pass. His desire to receive his share of the inheritance already is **not** merely a sin of self-centeredness and greed – it is also a show of disrespect for his father, a breaking of the *Fourth Commandment*, a rebellion against God-given authority, and a disdain for God's gift of family. The son wants his father dead – or as good as dead ... at least to him. That's when one gets an inheritance – at the death of the parent. We can only imagine how the words, *Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me* [LK 15.12] must have pierced that father's heart. The younger son may as well have said, "Father, I wish you were dead so that I could already enjoy my inheritance."

This son knows **not** the value of God, family, or property. It is little wonder that he quickly *squandered his property in reckless living* [15.13] – *prodigal living* some translations put it. Ah, but we left something out – not directly in the text ... but there nonetheless. In order to be able to take his "property" on his *journey into a far country*, the son had to sell it – and that would not have been easy. The community would have frowned upon – quite sternly – this son's request. The normal practice would be for the son to build his own house on his share of the property and keep it in the family. But this son's disdain for the gift of such an inheritance is great. All he can think about is himself – his own plans ... his own fleeting pleasure. He cares not for family, community, or future. Yes, to sell his share he would

have to take whatever offer he could get – deeply discounted, no doubt. And before he finally got anything for it, he would have been confronted, again and again, by the reality that he was doing something wrong. This son is set in his sin. Before he finally gets the cash, God provides him plenty of opportunity to change his mind, repent, and return to his father – waiting for the proper time to receive his inheritance. But his heart is quite hardened.

As is sometimes the case, the Lord allows us to run the course of our sin – until we hit rock bottom and must view in high definition the depths of our own depravity. The son spends everything on extravagant living ... living beyond his means ... wasting ... squandering all he has both for the present and for the future. Now he must hire himself out to a foreigner (disdainful to the Jews) ... and slop the pigs (rendering him unclean ... not just dirty, but ceremonially unclean according to Jewish law). One pastor profoundly sums up our sin problem: *We rarely get enough of what we don't need to make us happy. The prodigal son, nearing the end of his joy ride, realized he had become just one joyless pig among others.* [Harrison, *A Little Book on Joy*, 15]

Finally this prodigal son *came to himself* ... came to his senses. He will go to his father and work as a hired hand. He will confess his sin: ***Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you*** [15.18]. This sounds good at first – but it isn't true, Christian confession. For confession embraces two parts: *First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.* [sc v.1] This young man may admit that he has sinned, but he does **not** intend to receive any forgiveness. He will make a deal with his father – as if we could ever make a deal with God to gain His favor and get back in His graces by what we do. This young man may think that his father is a soft pushover – after all, he did give him his inheritance. But he does not yet know the depth of his father's love for him – of God the Father's loving compassion.

Actually, the younger son is only a little different from his older brother. They both seem to believe that the father owes them – and that life in the father's house is on the basis of merit. The older son's words to the father after his younger brother returns home are just as sinful as the prodigal's

request for his share of the inheritance long before the father's death. One commentator has counted no less than seven insults – seven sins – against the father in the older brother's discourse. He is a prideful – self-righteous – man. He is every bit as sinful as if he had demanded his inheritance and squandered it – just as sinful as the prodigal son.

That is the way of our own sinful flesh as well – yours and mine. If you've ever been in a difficult, fearful situation in life, and found yourself making a deal with God – to be more faithful in prayer or devotions or Bible Study or attendance at the Divine Service or giving – you have not fully understood the extravagant, reckless ... even prodigal ... nature of God the Father's compassion for you. If you have ever thought that you needed to make yourself worthy before you could receive the lavish love of God the Father – you have not yet comprehended just Who your heavenly Father is.

Indeed, I suppose – sadly – that is simply the reality. We can't really understand just how very compassionate the Father is toward us. We lost that in the Garden. But God will not settle for that. He will work in your life over and over until that day when you know His love for you perfectly in heaven. Your heavenly Father – even when you are *still a long way off* from Him due to your trespasses and sins – He is always ... constantly ... vigilantly looking for you. And even though you are still far away from Him, He comes running out to meet you. It doesn't matter what the world thinks – that a dignified Person simply doesn't run like that ... that it is unbecoming of His divine majesty. It doesn't matter that He is going to get smeared with your filth and scented with your stench. He comes running to you with open arms ... embraces you with His compassionate forgiveness ... and lets everyone know that you are no hireling, no mere worker, no slave in His Kingdom ... but His beloved son or daughter.

And notice that the prodigal son doesn't even get the chance to recite his confession. The Father's love and forgiveness for you come long before your confession ... even long before your own coming to your senses and repenting. The Father's compassion came before the world's foundation – as He looked out in foreknowledge and saw what would become of mankind ... of me and you. And that compassion reached full expression when God

the Son came running out – while the entire world was *still a long way off* ... lost and dead in our trespasses and sins. The eternal Son came running out from heaven and embraced the weakness of our mortal flesh and became Man – hugging our humanity into Himself ... making Himself one with us ... and then kissing us with His peace and love and forgiveness and life.

***Behold, the Son of God, Who Makes Himself the Prodigal Son for You!***

Jesus – *Who, not knowing sin* God the Father *made to be sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God* [2COR 5.21]. The Son of God makes Himself to be the prodigal ... and the older, prideful brother ... and every other sinner in the world. He took for us the “I told you so” and “you’ve made your bed, now sleep in it” and all the righteous wrath, discipline, and punishment we’ve earned for our waywardness. Christ comes to the far country of earth and ends up slopping us sinful swine – and we spurn Him and hand Him over to the Cross. Christ became for us the Prodigal Son. He made Himself the wayward squanderer and the bitter, ungrateful, self-righteous Pharisee – so that we might be reconciled to and receive the running, loving, hugging, kissing Father ... so that we might be clothed in the robe of Christ’s righteousness, having been buried with Him and raised to new life in Him through Baptism ... might wear the signet ring of the Kingdom, the sign of Christ’s saving worked marked upon our minds and hearts ... and have our souls cleansed and shod in the Gospel of peace.

Today in this *Parable of the Prodigal and Prideful Sons and Their Compassionate Father* we once again have revealed to us the amazing magnitude of the Father’s love for us in Jesus Christ. God is truly prodigal toward us – pouring out upon us so richly and extravagantly both physical and spiritual blessings despite our constant falling into sin ... giving to us His Son for our eternal salvation and life. So whether you are like the younger prodigal son ... or the elder prideful brother ... or a combination of both – reflect ... repent ... return ... and receive the redemption purchased and won for you by your Brother Jesus Christ. Come into the joyful banquet the Father has prepared for you and for all His wayward yet beloved children. Celebrate and be glad, for you were dead and now are alive, you were lost and now are found – robed in Christ and His righteousness for life.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]