# It’s About the Father

## 4th Sunday of Lent, Year C ‑ Luke 15:11-32

*preached at St. John’s, Decatur, March 22, 1998*

*preached at Saint Mark’s, Hastings, March 25, 2001*

*preached at Saint Mark’s, Hastings, March 21, 2004*

*preached at Trinity, Columbus, March 18, 2007*

*preached at St. Paul’s, Henderson, March 10, 2013*

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, March 6, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

To tell you the truth, when I was younger, I really identified more with the older son in Jesus’s story in this morning’s Gospel lesson, the obedient son, the *good* son. I know you will find it shockingly difficult to believe, but I wasn’t really the rebel *type* when I was a young man. I was polite and obedient at home. I was studious at school and reverent at church. I was not “on the edge” in my personal appearance – my mom cut my hair until my second semester in college, for pity’s sake. I have even told you about my leisure suits, polyester shirts and white shoes. I was the good son, about as clean cut as they come. And so, when I was younger, whenever I heard this story, I was always left with the impression that the whole affair was just *un*fair to the older son, the one who had stayed home and done what his father asked him. I wanted it to turn out differently. I wanted things to even out in the end. I wanted justice.

Though I knew this story from some of my earliest memories, for me it didn’t really begin to dig its way into my heart until I began to realize that I was *not* the good son but the petulant, profligate prodigal. It was only when I too had turned to go my own way and failed, that I began to understand the power of this story for the other son. It was only when I had messed up my seemingly perfect life, that I began to see the problems in the good son’s reaction. It was only when I had managed to fall flat on my face a few times, that I began to see the enormous grace of the father’s response to them *both*. When I could relate to the prodigal’s plight of having already used up all his chances, having exhausted all his resources, I began to understand that if everything was *even*, if everything was *fair*, if everything was *just*… I had no chance at all.

I read a little story the other day about a vain woman who was showing a portrait of herself to a visitor. “I don’t think it really does me justice,” she disclaimed. “You don’t want justice, dear”, her visitor retorted, “you want *mercy*.”

The reality is that we are each of us somewhere between the two brothers in Jesus’s story. We are each of us some *combination* of the good and the not-so-good. We are each of us sometimes the good son, diligently doing our best, and resentful of those that do not. And we are each of us sometimes the prodigal, arrogant and self-centered, not *caring* what anyone else thinks. In the final analysis, we may *say* we want justice, but what each of us *needs* is mercy.

And yet, as I looked at this story again just last evening, it occurred to me once more, that in spite of how it is labeled in Bibles that *have* such labels, this story is not really about the Prodigal Son. Nor is it, in the end, about that son and his at least seemingly more steadfast brother. No, as I’ve said before, when all the analysis of the relative merits of the two sons is accomplished, when all the historic context and the literary structure is considered, when all is said and all is done, this story is simply *not* about two sons, it is about a *father*.

This story is about a father who, because of his love for his son, let him go his own way. In those times, this sort of advanced distribution of the inheritance was well within the bounds of the law. It was common enough that the conditions of such a distribution made it into the Law in the book of Deuteronomy, and into the Mishnah, the collection of ancient law. I wonder, though, on how many occasions the young man and his father had discussed such a plan, and how many times the father had managed to delay it. I wonder how many ways the father found to tell his son how valuable it was to stay connected, to be member of the community, to be a part of the family. I wonder how many times the father had told his son how much he loved him and wanted what was best for him. But the son had places to go and people to see, and finally demanded of his father, “Give me what will rightfully belong to me and let me get on with my life.” Even though the father knew in the depths of his heart that the son’s plan would lead him only to pain and grief, he knew just as deeply that he could not hold him and still hold his love. So the father divided his property and gave his son his share. Because he knew that only in freedom to leave, could his son be truly free to stay, this story is about that *father* who let that son go to what he already knew would be his ruin.

This story is about a father who waited for his son to return. In those times, when this sort of distribution had been made, the law held that the son was no longer to be considered as part of the family, he was no longer a son, he was lost. But how this father hoped and prayed that his son would return, that he would come back and again be a part of the family, serving and being served. His arms ached to hold his son again. His belly turned every day as he sat down to his table with one less place prepared. Day after day, month after month, *perhaps* year after year, the father’s heart broke as he stood outside his gates as day turned into night, and stared in the direction that his son had gone, hope and expectation becoming more and more colored with worry and fear. Whenever he looked to the horizon and saw a figure approaching, and it *wasn’t* his son, he died a little more. This story is about that *father* who longed with all his being for the one who was lost.

This story is about a father who ran out to meet his son. In those times, as in our own, a man’s dignity and his honor were irrevocably tied together. And yet this father, when he finally saw his son approaching, *ran* to meet him. He didn’t turn and bar the door to the one who had turned his back on him. He didn’t send his servants out to find out what it was that this *stranger* son wanted. He didn’t wait at the gates to press his advantage, to say, “I told you so.” Clothed in the long robes appropriate to a man of his age and wealth and station, this father reached down, pulled his robes up above his knees and *ran* down the dusty road. The son, dirty and tired, smelling of the filth of the life he had chosen to lead and the life he had been *forced* to lead, the son tried to fall to his knees to beg for his father to just take him in as a servant. But the father caught his son up in his arms, laughing *and* crying, held him to himself and kissed him. Whatever else happens, whatever their life together holds, this story is about that *father* that loves his son with all his heart.

Don’t you see, dear friends, that this story is about *the* Father, not some coldly abstract, transcendent deity, out *there* somewhere, but the loving parent who created humankind with the capacity to love, the Father who longs for our love so *much* that he is willing to let us go our own way, the Father who is even willing to risk that we will *not* return his love, in order to claim that which genuinely makes and marks us in his image. This story is about *the* Father, not some “bestest buddy” who smiles indulgently so long as everyone is “okay” with everyone else, but the absolute Lover of our Souls, who longs for us to abandon our self-centered pride and our hypocrisy and turn to *him*, the Father who waits and watches at the gates for any signal, any sign of our return. This story is about *our* Father, who does not stand on rights and *justice*, but who relentlessly *pursues* us in grace and *mercy*, *wherever* our wandering lives lead us. It’s about our Father who absolutely *runs* to meet us every time, *every* time we once again turn our hearts toward him. It’s about our Father who would, and *has*, given up all claims to retribution for the many, many, *many* wrongs we have done to wound him, and instead wraps us in his loving arms, wraps us with his whole self, again and again and again… and again.

Here in the closing weeks of our season of examination and reflection, here as we turn our faces toward the Passion and Death and Resurrection of the Christ, let us remember that that, too, is a story of such a Father – the Father who loves us enough to do *whatever* it takes to assure us of his love, whatever it takes to bring us home, absolutely *whatever* it takes to hold us in his arms.