**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**March 27, 2022**

**Text—Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

In today’s Gospel lesson, we hear one of the best-known and loved parables of Jesus: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Along with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, I’d say that this one is the most famous of Jesus’ parables. And for good reason, too. Who doesn’t remember the foolish younger son going out and squandering all of his inheritance on immoral pursuits, and then having to shovel pig slops just to survive? Whose heart is not warmed by the image of the son coming back to his father in shame, only for the father to tearfully hug his son and throw him a big party? Which of us Christians cannot see at least a little but of ourselves in the older brother, who refused to forgive his younger sibling and needed his father to encourage him to do so? This parable seems to have something to say to everyone: both those who have committed terrible sins and those who might be tempted to self-righteousness. It sums up the message of Lent, and of the Gospel as a whole, in a single story: that of a rebellious son being forgiven by his father. The parallels between the parable and us are clear: we too are sinful and rebellious children, and we too have a father who forgives us when we repent and return to him. It’s such a familiar and obvious story that it almost doesn’t need any further explanation.

Or is it? Sometimes when we hear stories that are familiar to us, we tend to automatically assume we know everything they’re about. We’ve heard this a million times, and we’ve had it explained to us a million times, so what else is there to learn? As it turns out, there are some things we can still learn from this parable, some things that we as American Christians have probably never thought much about. And to do that, we need to try to look at the parable, as much as we can, through non-American eyes. If we do this, we might see some things that maybe we had missed before.

Mark Allan Powell is a professor of New Testament studies at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. He is a prolific author, having written more than twenty books. One of the books he wrote is entitled *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*. One of the chapters in this book is dedicated to the Parable of the Prodigal Son and exploring how people from different cultures interpret what’s going on in the parable. It is a very interesting study, one that reveals some aspects of the parable that we Americans tend to gloss over. By focusing on some of these forgotten details, we can come to a more complete understanding of what this parable is actually saying to us, and develop a further appreciation of the grace of God that is revealed to us in it.

Powell begins his study of the parable by describing the typical modern Western, or American, way of understanding it. When we American Christians read this parable, we focus heavily on the sinful behavior of the younger brother. He arrogantly comes to his father and demands his share of the inheritance, basically saying that his father is dead to him. He then takes this money, goes out into a far country, and squanders his property in reckless living. At the end of the parable, the older brother refers to his younger brother’s dalliances with prostitutes, which shows how far the younger brother had fallen into sin. But eventually, after he had spent everything, he began to be in need, but because he had sinned so greatly, he had nothing with which to sustain himself. Eventually, he came to his senses, realized the depths of his sin, and went back to his father to confess his unworthiness and ask to be hired on as a servant. But the father forgives him before he even begins to speak, and throws a huge party to welcome him back, signifying the restoration of this sinner to fellowship with the family. The older brother gets angry because he is unforgiving, and he doesn’t think that the younger brother deserves this kind of treatment. His father tries to convince him to forgive his younger brother, just as he himself had forgiven him. The point Jesus is making to the Pharisees, therefore, is that they need to be merciful and forgiving toward sinners who repent, even really bad sinners, because in their repentance they were returning to God and starting their lives anew. God forgave them, so the Pharisees should as well.

In a nutshell, this is how we American Christians typically regard this parable. It is a beautiful story of sin, forgiveness, and redemption. But not every culture perceives it quite that way. In his book, Powell describes his discussions about the parable with Christians in Russia, and he was surprised to learn that their reading of the parable was not the same as the one that he was used to. The Russian Christians did not focus so much on the younger brother’s sin as they did his foolishness. Most of them did not mention the younger brother dishonoring his father or squandering his property on prostitutes; rather, they focused very heavily on the famine that occurred in the land where he went. If you know the history of Russia, you know that in fairly recent history, famines have been a major problem over there. During the Russian Revolution there was famine, during the Soviet collectivization of farms there was famine, and during World War II there was famine. Millions of Russians died from starvation over a period of just a few decades, and that memory lives on in Russian culture. Thus, to make sure you don’t get caught unprotected during a famine, you have to make smart decisions. You can’t just up and leave your family and go off by yourself; that would be extremely foolish. So in the minds of many of the Russian respondents, the main problem with the prodigal son was that he was foolish. Yes, he was also sinful, but his foolishness in leaving his family and exposing himself to hardship loomed much larger in their minds. By contrast, most Americans barely even remember there was a famine in the parable; we focus on the younger son blowing his money on immoral pursuits as the reason for his poverty. That’s not wrong, obviously, but it is interesting how our cultural lenses cause us to see something that people from another culture may not see, and vice versa.

Powell also asked some seminary students in Tanzania, in eastern Africa, how they perceived the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Their responses were even more different from those of the Russians. The Tanzanian Christians did not focus on the sinfulness of the younger son in squandering his possessions. They did not focus on his foolishness in leaving home and exposing himself to the famine. Rather, their focus was not on the prodigal son’s decisions or actions at all. They emphasized the lack of hospitality of the people in the faraway land to which the younger son traveled. If you look at the text of the parable, it says that when the younger son was in this land during the famine and he was in need, no one gave him anything. In the minds of the Tanzanians, immigrants come from faraway places and sometimes make bad decisions because they’re in a foreign land they don’t fully understand. It is the responsibility of the people of that land to help those who are vulnerable and in need, regardless of their immorality or foolishness. The true sinners in this parable were not the prodigal son, but rather the people who refused to help him in his time of need. The father, by contrast, welcomed his son back and showed him hospitality. So in this reading of the parable, Jesus’ point to the Pharisees is not necessarily that they should forgive sinners, but that they should show hospitality and mercy to those in need. Part of that mercy certainly does involve forgiving people’s sins, but the emphasis is definitely different. Again, we can learn something from this, and see that there is more depth to this parable than we realized at first. It helps us approach the biblical text in a fresh new way, and gives us greater insight as to what God actually saves us from.

And in the end, God’s graciousness on our behalf is the thread that ties all of these different readings of the Parable of the Prodigal Son together. Whether you focus on sinfulness, foolishness, or lack of hospitality, the father always remains the hero of the parable. He is the one who extends the hand of fellowship to his son; he is the one who receives him back when he returns in shame. He forgives his son’s sins, he lifts him out of the mess he has foolishly made for himself, and he shows him hospitality when no one else would. In short, the father saves his son from sin and death. He shows mercy to his son; he provides for all of his needs.

And that’s exactly what God our heavenly father has done for us, isn’t it? When we had gone astray, when we had sinned against him, when we had made foolish decisions, and when no one else would help us, he was there to help us in our hour of need. But unlike the father in the parable, he did not wait for us to come back to him; no, he sent his perfect, obedient Son Jesus Christ to earth to save us. And unlike the older brother in the parable, this Son of the Father did not resent his Father’s graciousness; rather, he did what was necessary to make that graciousness possible. Jesus came and sacrificed himself on a cross, shedding his blood to win forgiveness for our sins. Now when we repent and turn back to God, he receives us with open arms.

But then on the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead, conquering death and giving us hope that every hardship and suffering in this world will one day be over. We will not have to deal with famines, sicknesses, injuries, poverty, or anything else like that ever again, even if those disasters were caused by our foolish decisions. God’s wisdom covers over our folly, and he restores to us everything that we have foolishly squandered.

And on the last day, Jesus has promised that he will return to earth and welcome us into his kingdom with open arms, showing us the endless hospitality that we could never receive from anyone in this life. No matter how you look at it, God our Father is our Savior from all the enemies that oppress us. He has saved us through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ, and thus we can always turn to him in repentance and faith, knowing that every time he will receive us gladly for the sake of Jesus. He remains our loving Father who wants to grant all the riches of his grace to us, and thankfully in Christ he has done so lavishly.

So whether you’re American, Russian, Tanzanian, or whatever, the Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches you that God is your Father, you are his beloved child, and that you always have a place in his home with him. He will not treat you as a hired servant, but rather as an honored son or daughter, because he has adopted you into his family for the sake of his firstborn Son Jesus. And in Jesus, you have an older brother who does not resent the grace that God has shown to you, but rather rejoices in it and actively takes a part in making it happen. Whether you are feeling guilty for your sins, ashamed at foolish decisions you have made, or like no one in this world cares about you or wants to help you, God in Christ is the solution to all of those problems. He forgives your sins, makes up for your failures, and welcomes you into his kingdom. Whatever your place of birth or culture of origin may be, God’s grace to you in Christ is the common factor that always shines through in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Amen.