

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Luke 15:1–3, 11–32**

**Sermon: “The Jealous Son”**

The parable of the prodigal son, as it's known describes the amazing joy God feels toward those who repent, an important Lenten theme. Very helpfully paired with this Gospel is the Old Testament Reading from Isaiah. It describes the joy the sinner feels when God's anger has turned away, replaced with salvation. Our text, the third of Jesus' three parables in Luke 15, is the capstone of his rejoinder to those who complain and criticize him for welcoming and eating with sinners. A good theme to remember today is that we are in God's Family by the same forgiving love that sent the Father's Son to the cross for those sinners we think are worse than us.

If you've ever watched a good magician, his tricks and illusions will prompt you to ask, “How did he do that?” Magicians will tell you that much of what they do happens by way of distraction.

If the magician can get you to look intently in one direction at what he's doing, you won't see what he's doing elsewhere, and the result will leave you stunned. So, get ready for some sleight of hand this morning.

This is the third parable Jesus tells that responds to the criticism he's been receiving from, of all people, the upstanding, churchgoing crowd. In the storytelling fashion of his day, the third illustration of a series is designed to be the clincher. In this one, Jesus has done a pretty good job of distracting even today's hearers, because most people call this the parable of the prodigal son, or the parable of the lost son.

The younger son does live up to that title, doesn't he! His request for his father to divide the inheritance was an implicit wish for his father's death. Just as bad, he put the family business at risk by demanding that inheritance, for now the father has less working capital with which to conduct the family business. Not only did he fritter away that precious capital on himself in immoral ways, but those who profited from his wild living were Gentiles!

Immoral, unwashed, unclean Gentiles! And to top it all, word of his shameful request no doubt had spread throughout the village back home. The family is humiliated, and the villagers are upset because the father's financial capacity to be their patron has shrunk. What a jerk! Who of us wouldn't think, "I hope he gets what he deserves!" Jesus knows our thoughts. He assures us that the young man did not escape the consequences of his foolishness. "Ha-ha! The joke's on you, buddy. Where did all your friends go once the well ran dry?"

The only work he found was feeding pigs, a humiliating job for a Jew. No one, not one of his newfound drinking buddies, bothered to help him out. "Well, you got what you deserved!" If Jesus had stopped there, we'd be reassured that the wheels of justice still turn efficiently.

But that's not the end of the story by any means. Jesus tells us that the young man woke up. He came to his senses. The light bulb went on, "If Dad would take me back as a slave, my life would still be better than this!" So, he packs his meager belongings and, on the way, back home begins to rehearse his apology.

“Dad, I messed up. I’m not worthy to be called your son, but could you find it in your heart to give me a job as one of your hired hands?” If you aren’t gloating over what the mismanagement of his inheritance brought him, you’re certainly pleased that he has to eat crow, that his big plans for himself will only land him a servant’s job, if that. “Ha, you thought you’d come home the big man; you thought your big ideas would make you somebody. But look, you’re going to be just another name on your dad’s payroll.” The magician has our attention!

Then he rivets our attention more forcefully. Just when we expect that dad is going to make this kid bow his face to the dirt, lick his dad’s sandals, and grovel for mercy, Jesus creates an unexpected twist: dad runs out to greet him as though he were the dignitary! Dad throws a filet mignon on the grill, arranges a welcome-home banquet complete with music and singing, and, in front of everyone, puts a ring on the kid’s finger, shoes on his feet, and a suit on his shoulders. “What? This isn’t fair!” But the magician smiles and continues.

Because now it's time to introduce the character with whom he knows we'll be eager to identify: the older son. And when dad explains what all of the hoopla is about, the older son expresses our indignation. "Why, I've slaved for you all these years. I never disobeyed you. Never gave you any grief. Yet you never threw me so much as a pizza party! Uh, uh. I'm not going to be a part of this mockery! I'm not celebrating the return of this son of yours as though he were some kind of hero."

And we bystanders are thinking, "Finally! Someone with a clear-thinking head on his shoulders! A voice of justice! This indulgent father needs a wake-up call, and, thankfully, the older son has the guts to deliver the goods." And the magician smiles even more.

He has us firmly in his grasp. We can't wait to hear how Dad is going to answer that. Will he awaken from his sleep of injustice? What do you say to that, Dad? "Son," he begins.

Now maybe the effect of this word escaped you because you were all in for a harsh treatment of the prodigal, but in case you missed it, the elder son had just heaped quite an insult on his dad.

“I’ve slaved for you all these years.” Wow! Really? That’s how you think of your generous dad—a slave master? “You think I’ve made your life that confining and miserable? You think I’ve treated you as just one of the hired hands? Only given you slave-quality food? Slave-quality accommodations?” And then there were the other words, “This son of yours.” “Are you saying you aren’t part of this family? Are you implying that he and you are not brothers? That you don’t have the same mother?” But Dad has chosen to ignore these insults. “Son,” he begins. And he then reassures him that this welcome home has done nothing to damage the relationship between them. “All that I have is yours. But we had to celebrate. Necessity compelled it. For this brother of yours who was dead is alive, who was lost is found.”

And now we know. Now we get it. The sleight-of-hand trick distracted us with this prodigal son stuff to sneak up on us and confront us with our own elder-son sins of resentment, to face us with our own elder-son sins of begrudging forgiveness to those we don’t think deserve it, to meet us with our own elder-son sins of disrespect for a

Father whose love for us is still intact because he has mercy on all—on those whose sins are visible and on those whose sins are hidden away in the heart. And thanks to his skillful storytelling, we didn't even see it coming.

Oh, but how does the story end? How we finish it says a lot about us. If we think the elder son should hold his ground, refuse to enter the celebration, begrudge his father's grace, well, Jesus shakes his head in sorrow. We don't get that we are in God's Family by the same forgiving love that sent the Father's Son to the cross for those sinners we think are worse than us.

It is fitting that those who do not forgive as they have been forgiven remain outside the party, because that's where they will spend eternity—outside the endless celebration of God's love and forgiveness in Christ. But those who rejoice with the angels over one repentant sinner will enter into the feast. We enter by the same act of love by the Father—giving Christ Jesus into death on the cross—by which the prodigal enters.

They will find just as much of a Father's welcome as any prodigal. So  
how does the story end for you?

Amen