

“Praying the Parable”

St. Luke tips us off so that we can understand this parable, when in the first three verses he writes: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” Tax collectors and sinners – Pharisees and scribes --- and Jesus.

Since St. Luke has already given you a heads-up on how to understand this parable – and since it is one of the most familiar parables in Scripture – I’m going to take a little different approach to it. I’m calling it – “Praying the Parable.” Listen to the words you prayed in the Collect – as they are applied to the parable – and to you.

“Almighty God, our heavenly Father” – sounds like a typical prayer, addressed to “Our Father who art in heaven.” And lo, and behold, we have a “father” in our parable – which ironically is called the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

It’s ironic because – although the younger son “squandered his property in reckless living” – it is the father (the main character), who is also “prodigal” – which means, “to spend money or resources freely and recklessly.” He is the father who freely gives to all his sons.

“Your mercies are new every morning.” The parable begins with the younger son coming to the father – wanting what would normally be given to him, only after his father dies. What in the world is he saying? How is a father to hear such a request? But this “prodigal” father freely gives it to him! That’s “mercy.”

And that’s the mercy the Father has for us who come asking of Him. Even before we get to the rest of the parable – we confess that we are like the younger son – that all we have we have received from the Father, because of His mercy.

“And though we deserve only punishment,” you prayed. What do you deserve when you squander your Father’s things – living recklessly? Earlier you confessed that you deserve the Father’s temporal and eternal punishment. Yes, that is what all sinners deserve.

Taking the Father’s things and running away to live the life we desire for ourselves – we often find ourselves in the younger son’s shoes – falling short in everything – destitute, hanging out with the pigs. And because of our guilt and shame – we rarely dare to lift our eyes up to the Lord. Wallowing in our self-made pit, we are perishing – hungry, but not eating.

Though we have forsaken the Father, He has not forsaken us. He remains our dear Father – the One who has shown us mercy, over and over again, throughout our lives. And it is the mercy of the father that leads this rebellious son to realize that life is better in his father’s house. Even his hired workers have more than enough bread.

Realizing what he has done, the son decides to return – trusting his father will be merciful – and hoping he will agree with the conditions he brings.

Praying the Parable continues. “You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul.”

The son hopes for enough bread to fill his belly and the place of a servant in his father’s house – but his father has so much more in mind. His mercy is greater than what the sinner desires. The father sees the son – has compassion on him – and runs to greet him. He takes the son in his arms and kisses him (not what you’d expect?).

But the father is not done – the best robe, a ring for his hand, shoes, the fattened calf and a party. More than filling his belly and welcoming him home – the father will have none of this talk about being a hired worker. Having heard his confession, the father cuts him off. It’s still his house. The father will tell the son how things are to be. The father, in his mercy – forgives him, and receives him as his son.

Rather than disown you – turn His back and lock the door – the Father welcomes you. He hears your confession – He spreads the feast – He forgives all your sin – and He rejoices to call you His son.

“Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all your benefits, and serve you in willing obedience.” Why do we pray such a thing in our Collect? It’s because we are like the older brother – the self-justifying, pouting, grumbling one who is as much a sinner as his younger brother.

Notice how he disassociates himself with the younger one? When the father comes out to talk with him – he refers to him as the father’s son – not his brother. He does the comparison job – touting his faithfulness – as if he is deserving to receive the good things of the father – especially when compared to “your son.”

The father is merciful to this older son as well. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

In other words – “Son, heartily acknowledge MY merciful goodness, give thanks for all MY benefits” – come into my house, and rejoice with me. That’s what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees and the scribes. Stop grumbling about these sinners and sit down and eat with us.

We pray this petition because we grumble when our Father is merciful to others – and we fail to acknowledge His merciful goodness towards us. Rather than rejoicing that our brother or sister who was wallowing in sin, perishing, has been restored – we grumble about them being unworthy and that brings us to the conclusion of the Collect.

“Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord.” Why do our Collects always end this way? It’s because we are all like the younger son who doesn’t have a leg to stand on before our Father who is in heaven – but, “through Jesus Christ” we receive His mercy. Because of Jesus, our Father doesn’t give us what our sin deserves – He gives us what His compassionate heart desires.

Dearly beloved, in and THROUGH Christ Jesus – the Father forgives all your sin – for squandering His gifts, for reckless living, for grumbling and despising your brothers and sisters.

Do not refuse His mercy. Do not refuse to enter into His house. Do not turn up your nose and turn your back to Him who receives sinners and eats with them.

Come and sit with Him who comes running to you now to have compassion on you. Come and rejoice with His Son, Jesus Christ – who now spreads before you the feast of His Body and Blood – to reconcile you to the Father, to restore you to His house.

For you were dead, and are now alive – you were lost, and now are found
“through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.