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THE FATHER'S INVITATION TO THE FEAST
Luke 15:1-3, 12-32; Lent 4C; March 29-30, 2025

Our Gospel Reading today, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is not like parables that typically begin, "The Kingdom of God is like." It's more of a short story that Jesus tells. A few other parables are like this, but this one might be the most developed. The title given it by Bible editors, "The Prodigal Son," might lead us to think that the central character of the story is the younger son, the prodigal, who left home and came back, but that is not really the case.

The central character of the story is the father. Jesus began the parable: **There was a man who had two sons.** It is true that the younger son sets the plot into motion: demanding his share of the inheritance before his father died and leaving home to squander his wealth. But the key to the parable is the father with two sons and how he treats both sons, the one who left and returned and the one who had stayed home. It is the father who gives a feast in celebration of his younger son's return, inviting all to rejoice with him, but the elder son does not want to celebrate, even when his father gave him reasons to do so and pleaded with him to join the feast.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Luke tells us. **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."**

The **tax collectors and sinners** referred to here are people who heard Jesus' call to repent of their sins and turned to Jesus in faith as their Savior. In terms of last Sunday's Gospel, they were fig trees bearing fruit. The tax collectors of Jesus' day were notorious. They were considered traitors to the Jews since they worked for the Romans collecting taxes. They got rich by collecting more taxes than required, keeping a share for themselves. They used their positions of authority to take advantage of people. Tax collecting was a way to steal from people while having the appearance of doing what was legitimate. Tax collectors would fit the Catechism's definition of "openly unrepentant sinners." Matthew, one of Jesus' chosen Twelve Disciples, had been a tax collector before following Jesus.

Zacchaeus, that “wee little man” who climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, was a very rich chief tax collector. When Jesus went to his house to eat with him and forgave his sins, Zacchaeus showed his repentance by returning four-fold what he had cheated out of anyone and giving half of his wealth to the poor (Lk 19:1-9). As a disciple of Jesus, he would continue to be a tax collector but only collect what was owed and not take advantage of his position to cheat people.

This is why Jesus **received sinners and ate with them**. It was to call them to repentance and faith in Him. Jesus went to be with sinners to forgive their sins and welcome them into God’s kingdom by faith in Him, whatever their sins were. And in faith, those tax collectors and sinners Jesus ate with and received as His disciples turned from their sins and followed Him. The **younger son** in the parable was like the tax collectors and sinners Jesus received and ate with.

Christians consider themselves one with the tax collectors and sinners. When we hear Jesus’ parable, we see ourselves as the younger son who sinned against his father and went his own sinful way, but repented and returned to his loving father who received him as his son and forgave his sin. The father accepted him back as a son.

We are God’s children. Because of our sins, we don’t deserve to be counted as God’s children, but God our Father loves us, has compassion on us in our sins and weaknesses, and gave His Son to earn our forgiveness. The younger son did not and could not earn his way back into his father’s house but was received back by grace. The younger son, separated from his father by his sin, remembered what his father was like, which gave him the hope, the faith to trust that he would be welcomed back home, even though he did not deserve it. When we pray, “**Our Father who art in heaven,**” we believe that God is our true Father and we are His true children, so we can be bold to pray, “**and forgive us our trespasses**” because we are His dearly loved children, and He is our dear Father.

The other group that heard Jesus’ parable were the **Pharisees**, who **grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”** They were like the elder son in the parable who, when his father welcomed home his brother, did not think his younger brother deserved back into the family and refused to celebrate his return.

The Pharisees had rejected John the Baptist's earlier call to repent of their sins in preparation for the coming Christ. When Jesus Christ came, they rejected Him and His call to repent and follow Him in faith. They did not think they needed God's forgiveness since, like the elder son in the parable, they had done everything God required and should not be counted with the sinners but deserved God's favor.

The temptation for church members is to start thinking like Pharisees. It might begin by considering our pedigree. "My family and I have been members for generations. I raised my children right. I come to church regularly. I give a generous offering. I never got divorced. I've got my life in order." This sounds a lot like what the elder son said to his father. **"Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"**

While the younger, prodigal, son had considered working his way back into his father's graces, he ended up confessing only that he didn't deserve to be a son because of unfaithfulness. The elder son thought he had earned his place in his father's house and deserved everything he had. He showed what was in his heart by complaining about the extravagant feast his father threw to welcome his brother back, while not even acknowledging that he was his brother – **this son of yours**. He thought his father was wasting his – the elder son's – inheritance on his worthless brother. God is the Father of both sons.

Jesus' parable encourages sinners; they can repent of their sins, be forgiven by God, welcomed back and remain in His house forever. Jesus also told this parable to warn us against self-righteousness and any delusion that we deserve to be counted as God children by anything we do. All God's children are sinners and need to repent, turn from their sins and return home to their Father's house where there will be feasting in celebration of our forgiveness.

God the Father is at the center of this parable. Where does Jesus, God's Son, fit? Sinners are invited to feast with God, but first the **fattened calf** needs to be slaughtered.

For there to be a feast in the parable some things needed to happen first. The father's words in parable describe what it takes for sinners to be forgiven, saved, and welcomed back home. **“Bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”** Jesus is the **“fattened calf”** prepared for the slaughter.

That the calf is described as “fattened” is literally “fed with wheat-grain.” Most cattle simply graze on grass or eat hay. But if you want to fatten up cattle in preparation for slaughter, you feed them grain. Cattle love eating grain like children love eating candy.

God loved the world so that He gave His Son to serve as the fattened calf. God became man so He could take our place as the sinner, as our substitute. God's Son got treated like the elder son in the parable thought his younger brother should have been treated. Jesus was sacrificed on the cross for our sins, and God our Father invites us to feast with Him in His house celebrating our return to the family.

Whenever we hear Jesus' words at the Lord's Supper, we are reminded of this. **Take, eat; this is My body which is given for you... This cup is the new testament in My blood which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins”** Our Father invites us sinners to feast with Him.

We sinners, undeserving of anything but God's wrath and punishment, can come back here every week. We come in faith. We have a loving and compassionate Father, who celebrates His children repenting of their sins and returning home where He welcomes us. He throws a party for us, a feast of His Son's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Amen.