

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father  
and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen...**

The parable of the prodigal son is a classic. We've heard this story since we were kids. It's one of those little gems from the gospel of Luke that really make us scratch our heads...

I looked at a few commentaries this week, and my goodness! There is a ton of material out there! Books, articles, blogs, interpretation studies... You name it; everyone has a take on it. Sign of a great parable!

One of the commentaries I looked at gave a little history on the interpretation of the prodigal son. Unfortunately, some groups have used the story in divisive ways.

Some early Christian groups interpreted the younger son to represent Christianity and the older son to represent Judaism. Christians were seen as receiving God's mercy and the Jewish people as rejecting God. In other words, the story was interpreted in a way that fueled anti-Semitic passion-- I'm pretty sure that wasn't Jesus' intention.

And during the reformation, some interpreters considered the younger son to represent grace people, while the older son as representing works people; in other words, pitting Protestants against Catholics. Again, I don't think that was Jesus' intention.

As with all scripture, interpretation is important. I think this story has created enough division, and frankly I wonder if this story is about the exact opposite of that. Let us not forget... the cross makes a difference...

We all see ourselves reflected in that story, whether the younger son, the older son, or perhaps even the father. Truth is... I suppose we're all of those characters and at different times in our lives. This morning I'd like to explore the older son, he's in a complicated situation. He's feeling injustice, anger, envy, jealousy... A very emotional spot.

There's a lot of adrenalin in that space. And that can be a tricky thing... On one hand it hurts to be offended, and on the other hand we get a little adrenalin, a little rush out of it—and that can feel good. Have you ever been with someone who's been offended, and when they're telling you about it, they're smiling? Have you ever noticed how some people love to be a victim?

Believe it or not, this emotional space can be physically addicting... When we're scandalized, it's a good idea to pay attention to our body. It's helpful to notice how much we actually like our emotional pain... And a little self-awareness can go a long way.

Back to the older son... He is everything you would want in a good son. He works hard; he's obedient, apparently likes parties! On all accounts he's a regular, stand-up kind of guy. But when he hears about the younger brother and the celebration, his heart is immediately hardened...

We all have a little familiarity with how that feels. Undeserved forgiveness offends our sense of fairness. And fairness is a big thing for us; it's one of our big values. We teach fairness to our kids... We try to model fairness... We work hard to keep things fair...

Did you ever have a kid that would play the "fairness" card? I can remember Johanna saying, "Dad, that's not fair..." It would drive me crazy...

Truth is, mercy isn't fair, forgiveness isn't fair, and that bothers us. Especially us law abiding religious people. We expect mercy for ourselves, but we're not so sure other people deserve it. Especially people we don't like...

When someone receives a blessing that isn't deserved, we can become terribly jealous and envious. And it seems to me the fundamental question for that older brother concerns reconciliation. How can the jealousy he feels for his younger brother be transformed? And by extension, how can we let go of our jealousies?

And this is important; because how we deal with on-going jealousies can mean the difference between being a loving, kind and gracious person; or being a mean, crabby and irritable person... Do you see the difference?

As Lent is the season of reflection and repentance, perhaps it is a good time to search our hearts for envies and jealousies. Is there someone you don't particularly like? Is there some jealousy involved? Envy and jealousies are a little like cancer. They start small and they can grow and metastasize, they can even lead to conflict and violence.

Quick story... The previous week, Kris and I were in Clarksdale Mississippi, known as ground zero for a form of music known as the blues. And we heard a lot of blues!

For many guitarists, one of the most influential players of all time was a guy by the name of Robert Johnson. He was born on a cotton plantation in the Delta in 1911 and died in 1938. During his short life he recorded 29 songs. These songs essentially set the music formula for all Rock and Roll or popular music since then. Eric Clapton studied his songs. So did the Beatles and the Rolling Stones...

Robert Johnson is the guy we associate with the famous "Cross-roads," where he allegedly sold his soul to the devil, to learn to play the guitar. He lived an itinerant life style of a musician, always on the move, always looking for the next meal... And because of that a lot of his life is lost to the tides of history.

His life is interesting in that he is credited with doing so much, and yet very little is actually known about him. And so, in the vacuum of solid information, myths often get started and tend to grow larger than life. Much of his life is a mystery, most everything except how he died.

Jealousy... As a roving musician he relied on the hospitality of others wherever he visited. In one community he stayed with a couple, and the husband became jealous of his wife's affections toward him. Out of jealousy, the husband poisoned him. It was a long and painful death.

Jealousy and envy can lead to horrendous things! The emotional space of anger, envy and jealousy is not only painful for us, it is easily transmitted to others as revenge.

Envy and jealousy can make us into terrible people and ruin our communities. And if we don't transform that pain, we will certainly transmit it to others.

And here is where the cross comes in. Through the crucifixion, we see Jesus dying exactly to the jealousy of the religious people, and through the resurrection, we experience His forgiveness. You see, Jesus is not wishing revenge on those who killed him, he is offering forgiveness. He is the forgiving victim...

It would be like, if Robert Johnson survived the poisoning and offered forgiveness to the husband who tried to kill him. Instead of retribution and revenge, it would be offering peace and reconciliation. In other words, the transformation of the anger and jealousy.

Jesus knows what unfairness and injustice feels like. And he let it go, and because Jesus lets it, we can let it go... And we pray that God's justice will ultimately prevail. A perfect justice rooted in abundant forgiveness for all.

As it was experienced by the younger son, it is also available for the older son.

Through the cross, and as the forgiving victim, God transforms envy and jealousy. God transforms the pain of unfairness into empathy, God changes injustice into love. This is resurrection living...

And once you see the pattern of Resurrection, you start seeing it everywhere. Resurrection is in our hopes and dreams, in our relationships, in confession and forgiveness, in graciousness, and wholeness. And I believe it, because I've seen it. I've seen it in my life; I've seen it in your lives... it's what God does...

We are people who confess, forgive and reconcile, we are people who love and are gracious, we are a strong and faithful people, and we too, are sent by the Spirit to be God's hands in the world, redeemed and forgiven.

The good news today is that through the resurrection, the story of the prodigal son may have a different ending...

Imagine the father and the two sons together, arm in arm as the risen body of Christ; all three hearts beating together as one. Now that would be a good story!

What's happening in your hearts these days? Is it possible to let go of those envies and jealousies? Is it something to pray about? Remember, we are people of the resurrection, we know reconciliation happens. You can trust it...

Amen...