

**Sunday morning worship at the Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso University,  
Valparaiso, IN | 4th Sunday in Lent | Mar 27, 2022**

**Reading: [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)**

---

We all know this story, right? The Parable of the Prodigal Son. We know it's a lesson about love and grace. The younger son doesn't really appreciate the love of his father and all the good things that come from living in his father's house; he wants freedom from all the family responsibilities; freedom to do what he wants right now. That's what he wants...until he tries life his own way, hits rock bottom, and realizes just how great life in his father's house is. To be back in that house is worth surrendering some of that so-called freedom he'd indulged in, worth taking on responsibilities. To be back in his father's house is worth even being humble, admitting that he did wrong, and begging for help. It's the pattern of the traditional Christian testimony story, of someone realizing they need God in their life.

But there's a lesson about love and grace for the older son, too. We know the younger son doesn't really appreciate the love and blessings of the father, because he does this horrible thing, asking for his share of the inheritance while his father is still alive, and then he leaves home. But pay attention to the older brother. He hears the music of a huge party, gets this report that his brother has returned and his father is so happy and relieved, and the older brother responds with anger: "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends..." His father reminds him: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

The older son had always lived in the father's house, a house of love and grace. A house where the father said, "all that is mine is yours" — and that's not just to show the father's love and openness; it's also literally true: since the younger son had already taken his inheritance, all that was left would one day pass to the older son.

But after living his whole life with this loving father, working together on land that sustained them both (and their whole family and workforce) and that would one day be his...the older son doesn't appreciate the father's love any more than the younger son does. He says, "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you..."

And what does that sound like? Resentment. Bottled-up resentment finally coming out. Yes, resentment of his brother for taking his share of the inheritance, bringing shame on the family, abandoning them, leaving them with less than they had before; yes, resentment of his father for allowing his brother to do that to them; but also resentment of his own work and life. "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you."

Resentment steals the joy from the good things in life. The older brother didn't find joy in working alongside his father, being trained to manage their work. He didn't feel thankful for his

position as firstborn son, who would inherit his father's estate. Instead he saw himself as a slave, forced to do all these things as if they weren't benefiting him, too, as if he weren't born into a position each of his servants must have envied. It seems like he didn't really *get* how much his father loved him, didn't accept that love and live in it, didn't even realize that his father probably would have given him a goat so he could throw a party with his friends, if he'd only asked. His eyes were blinded by his resentment; he could only see the negative side of things.

Resentment also makes it really hard to be happy with and for other people. If the older son saw himself as a slave, how could he not be furious at seeing his traitorous brother treated like a prince? If he couldn't accept their father's love for himself and enjoy the life they had together, how could he possibly be happy to see his brother being loved so unconditionally?

But if he had been able to see himself as blessed; if he really found joy in his father's love himself, maybe there would have been room in his heart to think: how amazing that their father could forgive his brother and welcome him back into the family. Maybe he even could have been happy that his selfish, foolish little brother saw the error of his ways and came back home to live with them and to share the load.

Jesus started telling this parable after he overheard a group of Pharisees and scribes grumbling about how Jesus welcoming sinners and spending his time with them. That little group of religious leaders, who devoted their lives to following God, could only feel revulsion and resentment that Jesus welcomed sinners and outcasts back into the family of God. Had those grumblers really taken in God's love and grace themselves, or were they carrying around some resentment?

So as we hear this famous story again this morning, let's take the opportunity to ask ourselves: where are we carrying around resentment? And why?

That should lead us to other, even deeper questions: Are we really taking in the fact that God loves us unconditionally? That other people love us and care about us? Do we love ourselves?

Or are we stuck feeling like we're forced to work, trying to prove ourselves or make ourselves loveable, to earn forgiveness or to earn worth or to earn a sense of meaning?

During this season of Lent, we've been starting worship with a confession that includes asking forgiveness "for squandering [God's] gifts of love and grace..." And that phrase catches me every time. Because every week I realize that there's been some way that I have squandered God's gifts: by not believing that I'm loved; by not recognizing the gifts I've been given, and then not feeling grateful for them; by not taking care of myself or asking for help...and therefore staying stuck in my own feelings of resentment. Which just keeps that cycle going.

And every week I see in the world some way that we together squander the gifts of God's love and grace. Because so many voices in our world tell us to be resentful: they tell us our lives aren't good enough like they are (so we probably need to buy something); or that God can't possibly love us as we are, so we better work harder at being good enough; they tell us to be angry with this group of people; to think that group of people doesn't deserve what they're being

given; to think they're taking what's ours; to think we're not getting what we deserve, or someone's trying to take something away from us.

These sorts of messages aren't driven by logic and finding out the best way to solve problems and to manage resources or programs; they're driven by resentment. They encourage resentment in us. They profit off of our resentment.

And they discourage us from believing in the gifts of love and mercy. They discourage us from seeing the good in the world around us and in our own lives. They discourage us from having open and generous hearts.

So many things, internal and external, lead us into squandering God's gifts of love and grace: squandering those gifts for ourselves and for others.

How does God deliver us from resentment? God opens up the way of thankfulness. Remember the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When his younger son returns home, the father has no room in his heart for resentment of all that his son has done; he is too full of thankfulness: "...this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

When we train ourselves to see our lives with thankfulness — and it probably does feel like training sometimes, like a discipline — when we train ourselves to see our lives with thankfulness, there is less and less room for resentment to grow. When we teach ourselves to focus on what we have and what is good, then we've got less attention left to get caught on things like comparing ourselves to others, or holding a grudge, or feeling like we've got the short end of the stick. And that thankfulness gives us a basis for making the most out of the good things in life, learning how to make the positive things bigger and the negative things smaller. And because it does all these things, distancing us from things like resentment and defensiveness and fear, thankfulness puts us in a position to be more open to God and to other people.

But thankfulness often begins with faith and trust: faith that we are loved by God and by other people; trust that what we have is enough for right now; faith that what we are is enough. And so it is through the gift of faith, and the gift of constantly reminding us that we are loved and forgiven, that God opens up the way of thankfulness for us, guiding us to live our lives in joy and appreciation and love. And as God gives us those gifts, and as we learn to really live in them more and more, then we are more able to offer love and grace to others.

Let us pray.

*Holy God, we give you thanks that you love us so unstopably. Lead us away from our habit of resentment, and open our hearts to trust in your love and to look on our lives with thankfulness. And as we learn to see and celebrate all that you have given us, make us more willing to welcome others to receive your love and good gifts, both now and in the world to come. In the name of your Son, who helps us to see your love more clearly, Amen.*