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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/6/2016, The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson about the Prodigal Son. It is a verse that lifts up the grace of the father in the story. So, this is from Luke 15, verse 20:

<sup>20</sup>And he [the wayward younger son] arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20, RSV)

This reconciliation scene is beautiful, and it could well thrill our souls to reckon with the idea that our God is like this good and compassionate father.

This particular scene is toward the end of the story. What I would like to do this time round in preaching on the story is to linger with the father at the beginning of the story. For it seems to me that the father shows grace there too — indeed, it might well be that the grace of the father at the start of the story makes possible the reconciliation of father and son at the end.

I bet the father aged ten years in those sad days when his younger son came to him and asked for his inheritance. Before that conversation, I imagine the father to still have strength in his body, spring in his step, and some color in his hair and beard. But after his boy comes to him, asks for his money, and heads off to a far land, I picture the father as broken down in various ways. Suddenly, he is an old man. Now his hair is gray or white. His posture is not quite so erect, as if the weight of the world is bending him downwards. If before he had been playful and cheerful, now he is subdued. Jokes and games give him no pleasure anymore. Even music seems less important than before. The departure of his son has taken a toll on him.

And the thing is, he knew it would! When his son stood before him and asked for his inheritance, a storm of emotions probably broke upon the man, but within all those emotions, chief of them for the old man was probably that his heart was breaking. His son was leaving home. His son was leaving his father behind. His son was heading off to a far land, and the father, graced with some measure of wisdom, probably knew that his son was heading off into trouble. He knew his son perhaps better than the son knew himself. He sensed that the boy was not ready for this step. The father might have foreseen that his son would squander his substance in riotous living, as the boy in fact did. His father might have foreseen this and worried deeply about it — not just for the squandering of assets that might have taken the father a lifetime to build up, but even more importantly, the father

worried and grieved over what would happen to his son. What would become of his son if he lost everything and was far away from home, with no loved one near to help him? Would his son survive? And how could the old man, the father, live if his son did not survive? It can be a hard world out there. This father might have grieved that his son was not ready for such a hard world.

But here stands his son before him, asking for the money, his eyes bright with anticipation of what fun it is going to be to be on his own, with money to spend. And the father complies. His son stands there with his hand out, and the father puts the money into that young hand. The old man's hand touches his young son's hand, perhaps for the last time as far as the father knows. For the son is soon off and gone, and the days of holding his son are coming to an end.

It is grace, I say, at the start of this story. There is grace at the end, yes, but also at the start of the story. The old man does not curse his son. He does not throw the money in the boy's face and scream at him to be gone and to never come back! Whatever sorrow the father is feeling inside, he sets it all aside in order to let his son fly. And isn't that a kind of respect for others? To let them fly off, even when you doubt that they are ready?

As for the son, he felt himself to be ready. Time, though, will tell the story. The young man was wrong in thinking that he could flourish in that far off land. He journeyed there, he spent his money there, he acquired false friends there, he wasted his money, and ended up in feeding pigs and wishing that he could eat the husks of the corn thrown to the pigs.

So the son was wrong in thinking that he could flourish in this manner of life. But should we not give some credit to the old father, who let the son go. Is that not its own form of grace, to let the young ones go and make their own mistakes?

So, the old man complies with the extraordinary request of his younger son. He gives the lad the money, the boy goes away, and the father is left gazing at the horizon. "There goes my son," he thinks to himself. The boy becomes more distant on the horizon, until at last he disappears from sight. But that boy is blessed with a good father, for when the boy is down and out and heads home, there is that same father, still gazing at the horizon, still searching for his son. And when the old man sees his son, he gathers up his robes, and though onlookers have been thinking that the father has become an old man overnight, see that old man run! He runs to his son, embraces him, so happy to have his son back again.

This story of the gentleness of the father at the beginning of things — the way he complies with the request of his son, leaving the father with nothing to do but to pray for the boy and to search the horizon for him — this story of the gentleness of the father puts me in mind of a certain text in the Bible. It is from book of Revelation. Perhaps you can guess the verse I have in mind. It is the one about Jesus standing at the door and knocking:

<sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20 KJV)

It seems to be the case that neither God the Father, nor God the Son, nor God the Holy Spirit are willing to burst down the door, rush in and overwhelm us. They knock. They wait for their voice to be heard. They wait for the noise of the town and of the riotous living and the thousand voices of temptation to subside, so that the divine voice can at last be heard. God waits for us to open the door. He could easily knock it down. He who can fell mighty cedars and disrupt mountains and calm storms on the sea — he could easily knock down any resistance we put up to him, but he does not. While we are still living, he let us live our own life. He is like that good father in the story — the one who looks on broken-hearted and worried as his son goes away, but lets the boy go.

Now here is a very important thing about the boy who goes away. In the story of the Prodigal Son, no matter how poor the boy becomes, there is one thing that cannot be taken away from him: that is the knowledge that he has a home and that he has a good father back there at home. In that foreign land, the young man might lose everything — his wealth, his innocence, his virtue, even his food and shelter. But what he cannot lose is the reality that he has a good father back home. A better father than I am or perhaps some of you are. This father back home is really a gracious father. He lets the boy roam, though he might well have foreseen the danger at hand. He refrains from bitterness, he does not turn against his son, but waits in hope. And one good day, his son comes home.

Earlier this week, I had the brainstorm of sending an email to Gwen to ask someone in the Choir to sing an old pious hymn for us: *Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling*. I had that brainstorm, but then I forgot it. I fear that maybe I have been moving too quickly this past year. Writing too fast, thinking too slowly, forgetting too much. So I forgot this. I forgot to ask Gwen to ask someone in the Choir to sing the hymn that I thought would be perfect for this part of the sermon. But, to my delight, Gwen chose that hymn anyway. Great minds, you know. Great minds, they say, run in the same direction. So, after this sermon, during the reception of the Holy Communion, we will all sing about the soft and tender calling of Jesus to us.

Here is why that hymn came to my mind: Think of the young man in his poor circumstances, feeding the pigs and wishing that his own digestive system would let him feed on the husks thrown to the pigs. Then think of that moment when, as the Bible puts it, he “comes to himself.” A certain thought arises in his soul. He probably always knew it as a theoretical matter, but now it takes definite shape in his soul. “I should go back home.” It is as if the prayers and the love of his father so far away have reached out and touched him. There is nothing violent here. It is just that the love of the father has softly and gently called the boy back home. And life becomes much better for the lad when he obeys that soft and gentle voice and heads home.

We are talking of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us. Each of us, in a way, is this Prodigal Son. We have all wandered away from our heavenly Father in various ways. But if we will settle down some and try to be really honest with

ourselves, I think we will hear the soft and gentle knock of Jesus upon our souls: Sinner, come home. What we have heard of Jesus over the years has found some place in our hearts. We might have headed off into riotous living, and we might have lost much along the way. But I do not think we have lost this! We have not lost the voice of the Holy Spirit urging us to come back home. Come.

“Come home, come home!  
You who are weary, come home”  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,  
Calling “O sinner, come home!”

Come home to the one who will in no wise cast us out (John 6:37), even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.