

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 30, 2025**

**“A Man Who Had Two Sons”
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them” (vv. 11-12). Let’s start with a question: how could the father divide his property? If someone did that today, if a parent divided their wealth between children, it’d be a matter of transferring investments, or—for real estate—taking out a line of credit on the home and signing that over. Today, it would mostly be a matter of electronic transfers. But in our parable, how could the father divide his property? It’s not about transferring equity; a home equity line of credit hadn’t been invented yet.

For the father to divide his property, with “the younger son turn[ing] his share into cash, this [...] mean[s] that the [father’s] land [was] split [in] two, [then] the younger [son sold] off his [land] to someone else” (Wright). This is nothing like an electronic transfer of equity or wealth: the younger son demands his share of the family farm; and then, instead of tending to that farm like his family had done for generations, he just sells it off. That shows just how hurtful and harmful the younger son’s actions really were.

Not only does he treat his father like he’s already dead (an inheritance is normally what you get *after* someone dies; cf. Wright)—not only that, but he also breaks apart the family’s land for a quick cash advance. Just picture the scene—the father and older son watching some stranger take ownership of land their family had tended for generations. Now they’re left trying to get by with a farm that’s half the size; they’ll need to work hard to make ends meet, if that’s even possible. What the younger son does isn’t just selfish or ungrateful: he causes a rupture in his family; he shatters his family, and breaks it apart.

And then he departs as fast as humanly possible: “A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country” (v. 13). “[A] few days later”? He must’ve put the property up for sale right away...but even then, this seems too quick. Really, it appears that the younger son had a buyer already lined

up—so he could sell it off first chance he got. No long goodbyes here; the younger son rushes to abandon his family.

“[A]nd there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything” (vv. 14-16).

Salivating for pig food was—not surprisingly—something of a turning point for the younger son, but he figures his only option is to weasel his way back into the family as an employee. “But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” So he set off and went to his father” (vv. 17-20).

To anyone hearing this story for the first time, this should be the moment when the younger son finally gets what’s coming to him. He wounded and ruptured his family—but here, at last, he comes crawling back: finally, the moment of comeuppance. Maybe he’ll grovel, get told off, and sent packing...

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate” (vv. 20-24).

That’s it! The younger son barely starts his sob story, but it was never needed; before he even says a word, his father runs up and hugs him. If you like seeing justice done, this is very aggravating: I mean, really? Come on! But if you find this aggravating, you’re not alone; in fact, there’s someone right inside the story who agrees with you—as we finally meet the older son.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what

was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in” (vv. 25-28).

The older son was out there “in the field,” working away as always, acting responsibly. He hears the party, comes in with his calloused hands, only to discover that his brother—who shattered the family and left him to clean up the mess—is being celebrated. I wonder how often the older son had thought, ‘I wish I’d been the one to cash out and leave *him* with all this work’; I wonder how often he’d hoped for his younger brother to come back, just so that justice could be done... But instead, their father throws him a party—and the older son’s resentment turns to rage. “His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’” (vv. 28-30).

Until this point in the story, the focus has been on the sons; up till now, the father has seemed like nothing more than a gullible pushover. Yet, it turns out, this isn’t a story about the sons... “Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’” (vv. 31-32). All along, this story has been about the father, and the father’s love—a love that neither son had ever understood.

The younger son never understood his father’s love; he treated his father like an ATM, and he figured his father felt the same way about him; so when the money ran out, he assumed he wouldn’t be taken back as family, but only as an employee. His father’s love was beyond anything the younger son had ever imagined; it’s not clear he ever understood it—even at the end...

The older son, it turns out, had also thought of himself basically as an employee, with his father as the boss: “I have been working like a slave for you,” he said—as if his father’s love was something he had needed to earn. I don’t think the older son ever understood that his father would’ve loved him just as much if he’d never lifted a finger...

And in this loving father, we glimpse “what God’s love is like” (Wright). As one minister writes: “It is God’s dream to renew, reconcile, repair, and restore creation [...]. As the story unfolds, it is clear that the parable is [...] about the

determined, compassionate, infinite providence of God [...]. In the end, this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God, deeper, wider, and higher than our imaginings” (Curry).

The story isn't about the sons; it's about the father, whose love for his children is not diminished by their failings—and whose love desires the reconciliation of his ruptured family. This *isn't* the parable of the prodigal son; it's “the parable of the loving father” (Craddock). This is a story about the father's love—love that, even as the story ends, is still pleading and yearning for the reconciliation of his children. Amen.