

March 30, 2025
Vince Salvia, Lay Preacher
“A Broken and Contrite Heart”
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Thank you, Jerry, for sharing today’s scripture.

Friends, let us pray:

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

A Broken and Contrite Heart

The story of the Prodigal Son ends in joyous reunion, but it begins with separation and journeys through suffering and repentance.

For “...the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living.”

Today we call that going to college. Now maybe you weren’t the partier who squandered the tuition money your parents paid. But you may have known people like this. Maybe you were the parent. Or maybe you were the older brother. The story of the Prodigal Son resonates even today because the characters are so relatable.

Paul Tillich wrote that to be in a state of sin is to be in a state of separation. The younger son followed a very popular path: “MY will be done.” He physically separated himself from his father, but he also followed his own desires rather than his father’s will.

Often, the wages of sin are the natural consequences of our choices. For the younger son, living among the pigs gave him ample opportunity and motivation to reflect on what he had done, to reconsider his choices, and to repent. His suffering brought him face-to-face with his own folly. Rather than blaming others he forthrightly and wholeheartedly accepted responsibility for the mess he had made of his life.

So, “when he came to his senses”, with a broken and contrite heart “he set off and went to his father.”

How astonished he must have been when his father greeted him not with judgment or anger, but with joy at his return! When his father, filled with compassion, lovingly embraced and kissed him!

Consider, for a moment, how the story unfolds from the father’s perspective. He loves both his sons. He may have had misgivings about giving his younger son half of his inheritance, but perhaps he held out hope that his son would prove responsible. Or that, even if his son made some mistakes, nothing too terrible would happen.

Then the son departs for a faraway land. There is no way to text him or keep an eye on his social media posts. The boy is gone and, as far as the father knows, lost forever. What tremendous pain and grief he felt in his heart

at this loss, and how overjoyed he was when the son who was lost is now found.

One of the joys of having a toddler is that you can get them to join in just about any kind of silliness, and they are completely unselfconscious about it. When my younger son was little, I taught him to recite the dialogue from the big reveal scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* when Darth Vader discloses (spoiler alert!) that he is Luke Skywalker's father. I would voice the part of Luke, and he would say Darth Vader's lines. Let me tell you, you haven't lived until you've heard your two-year-old dramatically intone, "Join me, and we will rule the galaxy as father and son!"

Now Darth Vader was not going to win any Parent of the Year awards. But we later learn that, even though he had gone over to the Dark Side, Anakin Skywalker still loved his son.

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus says:

"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

The Prodigal Son had a father who loved him. But *how much more* do we have? When we are like sheep that have gone astray, we have a God who loves us and calls us back to him.

Let's give some thought as well to the elder son. His anger at the apparent unfairness of the exuberant celebration upon his irresponsible younger brother's return is a very human reaction and reflects a mindset of scarcity. What is given to the younger brother is taken from him. But the father had already "divided his assets between them", which means that the older brother had *also* received his inheritance. He complains that his father had never given him even a young goat so that he might celebrate with his friends – but did he ever ask for this?

Earlier in Luke 15, Jesus shares the parable of the Lost Sheep:

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

How much more of a brother do we have in Jesus, the good shepherd, who seeks out the lost sheep, who lays down his life for them?

We have a God who loves us and a brother in Jesus who, far from resenting the celebration upon our return, actively comes to seek us out to bring us home. When we return to God with a broken and contrite heart, we know and trust that our loving father forgives us.

The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to reflect on our relationships with others and with God. Where in our lives are we experiencing separation? Are there wrongs done to us that we haven't forgiven? Have we wronged others and not asked forgiveness?

Let us consider where in our lives we are harboring anger, or resentment, or hurt. If possible, let us seek reconciliation. If reconciliation is not possible, then let us acknowledge and then let go of our anger and pain, forgiving in our hearts even if we can't in person. Let us cultivate compassion for ourselves and our own weaknesses, and for others and their shortcomings.

Let us also consider our relationship with God. Have we separated ourselves from God due to a sense of guilt or shame over our own actions or choices? Or are we angry, and do we blame God for misfortune or tragedy we have endured? Has suffering or loss made us more compassionate, or more resentful? Do we hang on to conceptions of God as distant, uncaring or wrathful? Let us surface those feelings too, acknowledge them, and then let them go.

Julian of Norwich wrote,

Notwithstanding all this, I saw truly that our lord was never angry, nor never shall be. For he is God, he is good, he is truth, he is love, he is peace. And his might, his wisdom, his charity, and his unity suffer him not to be angry.

Sin is separation, alienation from God and one another. But Jesus proclaimed the good news of God's love. In the words of Peter in Acts 3, "Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out." Salvation is the action of God's abundant grace to change our hearts, forgive our transgressions, and restore us to relationship with God.

We are lost sheep, we are prodigal daughters and sons, who, repentant and contrite, ache to return home. Let us ask ourselves, "Am I ready to let go of my own selfishness, my own will, and to follow Jesus in saying and living, "THY will be done"?"

Loving God, our hearts are broken, and we long to be reconciled with you. Create in us a new heart, restore us to relationship with you, and help us truly to know the depths of your love.

For God is love. God loves you. And God eagerly desires to give you grace in abundance. God so loves us that he sends his son, our brother Jesus, to seek us out, to find us, and to bring us home.

Amen!