Isaiah 12:1–6

**You will say in that day: “I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. 2“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” 3With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4And you will say in that day: “Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. 5“Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. 6Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”**

2 Corinthians 5:16–21;

**From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”**

**3So he told them this parable:**

**And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. 13Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.**

**17“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ 20And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.**

**25“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ 28But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”**

The prodigal Father.

Our Gospel today one of those rare Bible stories that everyone knows.  Young or old, biblically literate or not, Christian and non-Christian, it doesn't matter. It's the story of a greedy, sinful person who realizes their error and returns to a loving Father who's been waiting anxiously for the wayward and sinful child to come to their senses and return home.  It's a wonderful and uplifting message about love and forgiveness.

Love and forgiveness.  That's why I kind of have a problem with the title of this parable.  Think about it!  This isn't so much a story about a wayward son who repented and returned home as it is a wonderful lesson about the unconditional love and grace and compassion of the father.

A lot of time, with this Gospel, we focus on the son, and our friends and loved ones who haven't been here in a while.  This lesson gives us hope and peace of mind.  You know if they do come back, God will forgive them and receive them back into the fold, no strings attached.

Of course, there's the other side to this, which we also recognize in the proverbial elder son, who had a real problem with dad welcoming Junior back home with no consequences.  There's not a person out there who can't empathize with the older brother's feelings of "it's not fair!  I've been doing this the whole time and what do I get?  Nothing!"

But let’s look at the dad. Well He obviously represents God.  But just consider the fact that the dad does what the son asks and divides up all his inheritance, giving it to the sons.  That’s right, I said "sons," as in plural.  Both sons received the entire promised inheritance.  We're told that only the prodigal demanded it beforehand and only the prodigal went away and wasted it, but both sons received the father's inheritance before he died.  And that's key here.  That inheritance would have been his when dad passed away in the unforeseeable future.  However, that required patient faith.  The boy couldn't live by faith.  The boy couldn't wait that long.  "Give me my share now."  Actually the boy was telling dad, "Live, die, I don't care.  I just want my money.  I care about me and me alone."  The crazy thing in all of this is that the dad actually does it!  How many of you would be so gracious?  He doesn't strike the boy down.  He doesn't write him out of the will for having such a cold, callous, and greedy disposition.  He doesn't even punish him or chew him out.  He graciously provides for all his children, even to the very one who hates him, despises him, and considers him dead.

So now when the prodigal son comes to his senses and turns back home.  He knows that dad will provide for him, even if it is as a hired hand.  At least he'll have adequate food and shelter.

The very fact that the son knows to go to dad for mercy is profound.  He knew dad was merciful.  He had learned that earlier in life by living with dad.  Dad didn't offer up lip-service.  He truly was mercy personified.  Nobody else showed this guy any mercy or kindness or love, especially after the money ran out, and this was in a foreign land where nobody knew him.  They didn't know what a true scoundrel this guy really was.  The hometown folks did though. They knew exactly what he did to get his money.  He was willing to kill off dad in order to feed his greed.  That's why his only chance was with dad, the sole source of the mercy.

So the prodigal son gathers up what's left of his dignity and heads for home.  There's the dad, vigilantly waiting and watching for this lost child to come home.  He sees the son, way off in the distance.  When he sees him he rushes out to meet him.  He doesn't wait for the son to come graveling back to him with his tail between his legs.  He doesn't wait for the chance to zing Junior with a well-deserved "I told you so" or "careful what you wish for."  No, he sees the child off in the distance and he rushes out to greet him and shower him with his love.

You know, I've often wondered why the dad never went out and looked for the boy before all this.  It seems like the loving thing to do instead of sitting and waiting for the boy to hit rock-bottom.  Well, maybe he did.  I can tell you that, as a pastor, I understand this now more than ever.  You really never do stop looking and reaching out.  However, if the prodigal child is intent on staying away, they're going to stay away.  Nothing you say is going to get them back.  It's truly heartbreaking, but sometimes you have to just sit back and wait; wait for them to hit rock-bottom; wait for the tragedy that inevitably comes along and hopefully turns them back to the church.  When that happens (and sometimes it does happen, praise be to God) we need to be ready and waiting to receive them back, with joy and unconditionally, just like the father did with his prodigal son.

Now consider also. Dad received the child back joyfully and unconditionally, in a very public manner, with a huge banquet, he was completely restored.  This is big.  If dad didn't insist on terms of repayment as part of the son's re-acceptance into the family, then nobody else could or should.

Notice the son wanted to repay dad the huge debt.  That was the son's initial idea of repentance, saying "I'm sorry" and then doing something to show that he was sorry.  That's what had the Pharisees and scribes in an uproar.  This was their understanding too.  Jesus was teaching and eating with the tax collectors and prostitutes.  These prodigal children had done nothing in terms of "earning" repentance, and Jesus wasn't demanding anything of them.  However, when the prodigal son actually came face-to-face with his dad, he had a bit of an epiphany.  He finally understood what true repentance was.  He simply confessed his sins to his loving and merciful father, leaving off the part in his confession about being treated as a hired hand and working off his debt.

You see, it took being in the presence of dad to realize that it was truly impossible to pay off that huge debt and fractured relationship that he had created.  No amount of good deeds could make up for the harm and the damage that had been done.  If he was going to be restored to a right relationship with dad, it was completely up to dad.  And Dad pulled out all the stops in welcoming his once-dead, but now-alive son home, fully restored to the family.

When you think about it, in a very real way it was dad who was prodigal.  You see, many people wrongly believe that to be prodigal means to be wayward and corrupt; selfishly and greedily missing in action.  That's not what the word means!  To be prodigal means to be "recklessly extravagant; to be lavish with one's wealth; to spare no costs; to withhold nothing."  Was the foolish son "prodigal?" Yes!  He spent his riches recklessly and foolishly on all the wrong things, and he paid the price for his recklessly wasteful foolishness and selfishness.

However, dad too, in a good way, was every bit as prodigal in lavishing his love and mercy and forgiveness upon his humbled, repentant son.  My brothers and sisters in Christ, that's what the prostitutes and the tax collectors, the lowest of the low, understood when they were face-to-face with their Lord and Savior.  They knew that in Christ, who lavished undeserved grace, mercy, and forgiveness upon them, they were completely forgiven and unconditionally restored to their heavenly Father's family.  Unfortunately, that's exactly what the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes didn't understand.  That's why they grumbled and complained.  It wasn't fair.

This is why this parable still speaks to us today.  Our life, our forgiveness, our salvation, our everything is a result of our heavenly Father's prodigal love and compassion for us.  Yes, we do go astray.  He allows us to go our selfish, sinful ways.  That doesn't mean that He's happy to see us go, but He's not a bully.  He's not going to make us love Him.  That doesn't work.  By the same token, He's always here, arms wide open, just waiting to receive us when we turn back to Him in repentance.  No strings attached.   The debt is simply too big.  The damage is too great.  The wage of sin is death, and we can't pay for even one single sin.

Talk about prodigal!  Our heavenly Father crucified His one and only Son, for us.  He was the complete payment for all our sins.  Because of Christ's death and resurrection, all mankind is completely redeemed.

You know, because of this salvific reality, you almost have to agree with the proverbial elder brother here.  It's not fair.  It's not fair at all.  Thank God that He's not fair.  Thank God that instead His love, His grace, and His mercy for us is prodigally unconditional, unwavering, and eternal.  That, my friends, is the Gospel story of our Father. our almighty God and heavenly Father. AMEN