

Grace and peace to you from God our reckless, extravagant Father and from Jesus Christ the one who brings us the Good News, amen.

In our Lenten Bible Study on Wednesday evenings we've been talking about forgiveness a lot. We talked about how many times we should forgive someone for the same offence and about why we should forgive in the first place. We even talked about the three hardest words in the English language to speak, "I am sorry." Saying I am sorry carries a lot of weight and meaning. It says I admit I was wrong, and I know that my behavior hurt you. Saying I am sorry also says I won't do it again. Please forgive me. What I just described was how the process of repentance works. In my life I've watched this scene play out over and over again. Especially when our kids were small and now I see it again with our grandchildren. One of them commits a crime against the other. There's outrage and tears. There's running to mom or dad, or grandma or grandpa, and the tattletale tells his or her side of the story. Then mom or dad tells the one who committed the offence to say you're sorry. The child complies in a very sarcastic sounding voice, "I'm sorry..." Then I would tell them to repeat the words, this time acting like you really mean it... Does any of that sound familiar? It's hard to tell the sincerity of an apology, even from adults.

In our Gospel story for today, commonly called the Prodigal Son, we assume this to be a story about repentance. We assume it to be about how the younger son

greedily squandered his share of the inheritance and then finds himself destitute and thinking about eating the slop he's been feeding to the pigs. At some point in his desperation he "comes to himself" and decides to return to his father's place where even the slaves eat better than he has it right now.

So, I'm curious, if this is a story about repentance why doesn't Luke mention repentance in this story? I mean, he does in the first two "lost" parables preceding it. You remember the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Jesus tells the people there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the 99, in the case of the sheep, who don't need to repent. So, I'm curious why that word doesn't appear in this week's story. Maybe it's because the theme has already been so well established via the first two parables that it didn't need to be repeated. Or maybe it's so obviously a story about repentance it feels redundant to name it. Or maybe... maybe it's not really a story about repentance at all.

Here's the thing: I'd like to think the younger son is sincerely repentant. I really would, but I'm not so sure. Everything turns, I think, on the scene where the younger son "comes to himself." By this point in the story, he's already made the outrageous demand of his father to dissolve half his holdings to grant him his inheritance early; he's already taken off for a distant land, apparently eager to put as much distance between himself and his family as possible; he's already wasted all his money; and he's already been caught up in a famine and unable to find any

work beyond feeding pigs. Now, here's where things really start to get really interesting... As he's sitting there, all bummed out and ready to feast on the slop he's giving the pigs, it occurs to him that the poorest of his father's employees are – right this very moment – eating better than he is. So, he decides to go to his father, admit his mistake, and beg forgiveness. A classic story of repentance, right? Maybe, maybe not.

For most of my life, when I got to this point of the story I assumed the son is being genuine. He realizes what an obnoxious, ungrateful punk he's been and so apologizes. But what if it just isn't so? Maybe he realizes his old man is a sucker. Maybe he figures he can con his way back into his father's good graces. Maybe by "coming to himself" Luke means he returned to the same old jerk that took his father's wealth and squandered it on dissolute living... The thing is, we have no way of knowing, even from the most careful reading of the passage, which interpretation is right. Sincere or scheming, genuine repentance or a total con. We just can't know. I want to believe he's sincere because that seems only fair and it's the way I learned the story and the way I've preached it, but what if... I mean, we all make mistakes, and if we admit them and apologize, then maybe we deserve a little grace. That's the way repentance works, right? But what if he's just jerking his dad around again? What if he's still an obnoxious, arrogant, loudmouth bother? Then he absolutely doesn't deserve the forgiveness of his father.

Keep in mind this whole story starts because the good people of Jesus' day – the faithful people, the religious people, the law-abiding people – are pretty upset with Jesus hanging out with all these folks Luke names “sinners.” I have to admit Luke isn't using “sinner” in the Lutheran sense that “we're all sinners,” but instead as a designation for those whose behavior has been so egregiously bad the whole community knows about it. I think if Jesus hung out with these folks and they all shaped up and changed their lives and started going to synagogue, maybe the Pharisees and scribes would've been more accepting. I mean, everybody love a good repentance story, but, apparently that hasn't happened, at least not yet. Evidently, they're still sinners. So, maybe Jesus tells a story about a sincerely repentant son in order to reassure everyone he's confident these sinners, like the prodigal, will eventually come around. Or maybe he tells a story about a son who remains a complete jerk right up to the very end. What would be the point of a story like that? Maybe, just maybe Luke wants to emphasize how God simply never gives up on anyone, even those who never even seem to realize they're lost.

We just can't tell. And I don't think that's an accident. I think St. Luke – one of the finest writers in the biblical canon or, for that matter, beyond it – is being deliberately ambiguous. Why? Because after a couple of parables clearly about repentance, Luke shifts the attention from the repentant sinner back to the real subject of the story, our forgiving God. With God I'm not sure it matters whether

the younger son is repentant or not. Take the reunion scene, for instance. I don't know if you noticed, but when the son gets back home and starts out with the speech he's rehearsed, he barely gets into it before his father interrupts him. The father runs out to greet him and whether his confession is sincere or not, the boy doesn't even get to finish it, never quite reaching the "treat me like a hired servant" part because the father is smothering him in a bear hug and ordering the servants to bring him clothes and shoes and a ring – the mark of an heir – and ordering a banquet and calling for a party. Why? Because he doesn't care if his son is sincere or not. He's just so, so glad he's back.

Maybe we read this as a repentance story because the repentance formula – screw up, apologize, receive grace – makes sense to us. Whereas the foolish, extravagant, reckless – dare I say prodigal – love of the father doesn't. Or at least it seems a little risky, a bit unsettling, perhaps even indulgent. Or maybe I'd like to think the son is sincere because I'd like to think I'm sincere. You know what I mean? I'd like to think I learn from my mistakes, when I hurt someone I always apologize. When I do in fact apologize I really mean it, and that I'm always eager to amend my ways and each and every day I get a little better in every way. Come on, I know that's not true, at least not for myself... I mean, I can't speak for you, but as for me, sometimes I'm sincere and sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I learn

and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I'm really sorry for the mistakes I make, and sometimes I'm just bummed out I got caught.

And maybe that's the point. God doesn't really care in the end. Oh, of course God hopes we repent and learn and love each other better over time, but whether we do or not isn't the real issue. The issue is God loves us so much God doesn't wait for our confessions to forgive us. God doesn't wait for us to come to our senses to love us. God doesn't wait for sincerity to redeem us. God just comes after us, running toward us recklessly like that desperate, crazy-in-love, just-glad-we're-home father. As Paul wrote to the Roman Church ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8 NRS) God is a prodigal reckless, crazy in love with you Father who doesn't really care about your apologies, all he cares about is you. God is an extravagant loving parent who has so much forgiveness to grant that God dishes it out with abandon, so much grace to offer that God pours it upon us whether we deserve it or not, so much love to share that God simply can't hold back but lavishes it upon us so recklessly that it's just plain hard to believe.

May you know the unambiguous love of God your Father who has given you much more than half the inheritance, He's given you 100 percent of His love. May we never squander such a gift. Amen.