The Gospel Story in a Nutshell

Trinity 3 T Luke 15:11-32

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I’m sure that you’ve heard the saying before,

That John 3:16 is the Gospel in a nutshell.

This verse tells our fate without God – that we would perish.

But this verse also tells us what faith in God gives us –

It gives us eternal life because God sent His Son, Jesus to die for the world.

That’s the Gospel in a nutshell –

Jesus was sent to die for sinners.

If you want an image, or a story, of what the Gospel looks like in plain terms,

look no further than the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In the story, Christians are the prodigal son,

people who rely on their own self-righteousness are the older brother,

and the Heavenly Father is the father in the story.

The story really has all aspects of Christian faith and life –

It has sin, shame, embarrassment,

a child exalting himself above his father, only to humble himself to return to confess his sins.

The father and the son have reconciliation, forgiveness, a feast to celebrate!

The father restores the inheritance squandered by the son.

It really has all aspects of salvation played out for us to behold.

The Prodigal Son parable has been described by some,

as the greatest summary of Christian doctrine in one parable.

The story should be familiar –

the younger prodigal son asked for his father’s inheritance before he died.

In that day and age, such an ask would never happen.

Because, for a son to ask for his father’s inheritance,

Would mean that the son is basically asking for the father to die!

He wants the father’s stuff, but doesn’t actually want the father.

As you could imagine, such a thing would be met with punishment from the father.

You don’t disrespect your father like that.

But the young son’s punishment will soon come by his own merit.

Nonetheless, the gracious Father in the parable doesn’t punish His son.

Rather, He gives Him what He asks for, and lets him go –

not because the Father doesn’t love his son,

but because the son doesn’t love his Father.

Actually, the Father loves His Son greatly,

and renders himself dead for the sake of his son.

Now that the prodigal son has the cash to live his lavish lifestyle,

he’s free from the burden of his Father’s household.

This is what sinful human nature wants to do –

Our flesh wants to separate itself from the life given by our heavenly father,

So that being separated from him,

we can engage in whatever WE chose.

Like we may aim to do at times,

the prodigal son is free from the burden of his Father’s life.

He’s free to establish himself.

That’s when things turn south –

the prodigal son wasted his father’s inheritance.

On what, we don’t know.

But we could imagine.

Perhaps what he spent his money on isn’t all that different than the frivolous things we tend to spend our money on.

Regardless, the prodigal son was careless with the father’s inheritance.

He didn’t live as a son of the Father.

He freed himself from the slavery of familial responsibility,

only to enslave himself to his own selfish pursuits.

He neglected others to care only for himself.

As he will soon learn, that soon leads to a living hell for himself.

He rejected His family because he didn’t want them.

He didn’t love them, he just used them.

And using people is the opposite of loving people.

He gave up his status as a son of a loving Father,

To become a slave to his own sin.

How could anyone do that?

It seems so cruel.

It seems silly and wrong to do – why wouldn’t you want to live under the banner of the father’s love?

Yet, this is what sinners do all the time.

Every time we sin, we’re giving ourselves over to becoming a slave to our own sin.

The prodigal son does it because he’s selfish.

He lacks eternal love.

He’s corrupted by sin, death, and the devil.

He’s been duped by Satan into believing that it’s better to be served rather than serve.

He’s been duped to embrace a lifestyle that rejects God-given, God-ordered familial relationships.

He’s been duped into believing goodness is found in pleasure, not in a loving father.

He wasted his familial relationship.

But he got exactly what he wanted all along – separation from his family.

And look where he ended up –

The only thing that would be near him were the pigs.

Feeding pigs was considered the lowliest of jobs, and it didn’t pay well.

He became so hungry, the pig’s food even looked appetizing.

He even begged on the streets, but no one gave him anything.

It’s official, he hit rock-bottom.

The freedom he always wanted rendered him empty of food, love, and a family.

What happens next is the beginning of reconciliation, repentance, and confession.

These Christian doctrines describe how we are brought into a right relationship with our heavenly Father, even though we’ve squandered the great gifts He’s given us.

So, let’s see these things in action.

Having noticed what’s happened to him,

The prodigal son starts the steps of repentance.

He remembered that His father was gracious to the servants of his house.

Even they were treated well and were given more than enough bread to fill their stomachs.

His plan was to go to his father, and beg for a servants’ job.

So, as the prodigal son put one foot in front of another back towards his father’s house, he rehearsed what he was going to say –

“Father, I’ve sinned badly.

I’ve not lived as your son.

I’ve lived as if I mattered most, and not you.

Have compassion on me and simply, take me back to be a lowly servant.”

As the prodigal walks along rehearsing his confession,

the Father sees him and has compassion on him.

He sprints to meet him!

When he got there, he hugged his son, and kissed him!

The prodigal son with deep humility began to confess his sins as he rehearsed.

He confessed that he wasn’t worthy to be called his son.

He wasn’t even worthy to be considered a hired hand for the father.

The Father was overjoyed with his confession.

He called him son again, and restored all the inheritance he had lost!

He called for a joyous celebration!

“Put a robe on my son’s hand, and a ring on his finger.

And for goodness sake, put shoes on his feet!

Clothe him in everything I can give!” Says the Father.

“Not only that, but sacrifice the fattened calf, and let’s celebrate!

Because my son was lost, but now, he’s found!”

And so the feast went on.

This parable is a story about God reconciling sinners to Himself.

We constantly squander our heavenly Father’s inheritance by cheapening God’s costly grace by taking advantage of His graciousness.

Yet, when we confess our sins to our heavenly Father,

He runs to us,

hears our confession of our sin,

is overjoyed with our repentance and changing of ways,

and then throws a banquet feast for us.

This parable is enacted out each Sunday in you.

Through the confession of sins at the beginning of the Divine Service,

Out of the genuineness of your hearts,

You come back to your heavenly Father.

Out of mercy, compassion, and love,

The Father restores the riches of heaven to you,

Not because you deserve it,

But because he loves you.

Out of the Father’s abundant love, He gives forgiveness to you through the sacrificial death of His Son.

Jesus Himself is the fattened calf slaughtered,

whose bloodshed covers us as we are reconciled to the Father.

If you’ve ever noticed in Luke’s Gospel,

Feasts are a big deal.

Last week, we heard of the great banquet in Luke 14.

This week, we hear of a feast of reconciliation between us and God.

Luke ultimately teaches us about the feast we have now,

Today in the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus himself is the feast.

Through the lamb who was slain for the forgiveness of the world,

We participate in the celebration of heaven,

For you who once were lost, are now found in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You are once again called sons and daughters of our heavenly father.

This isn’t something that happens only once.

Rather, the story of the prodigal son is something

that happens everyday of our Christian lives.

As Luther teaches in the catechism,

we daily die to sin and daily rise in newness of life.

We wake up in the morning and make the sign of the cross.

We remember who we are in Christ and live the faith we have.

When we sin and fail to live as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father,

We come back to church, confessing our sins,

Begging the Lord to receive us back through the feast of His own Son Jesus,

Who is given to us by our gracious Father.

We ask for strength and boldness to do better,

To really live as sons of the heavenly Father.

He gives us the strength to do such each Sunday.

Today, and each Sunday, the Lord gives His body and blood to us.

And this is the meal which feeds, nourishes, and strengthens our faith.

Why? Because Christ has promised.

The new covenant is given through the blood of Christ.

The new covenant is that with repenting hearts desiring to restored to the family of God, we are restored, confirmed, strengthened, and established in the heavenly family.

May God reconcile us to Himself and us to each other.

Now, let’s do what families do, and feast together.

Let’s celebrate what the Lord has done for us.

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