4th Sunday in Lent (C) – March 30, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

The Adult Sunday School is currently in the middle of a series called "Making Sense of the Cross." We are exploring the different ways the church over the past two millennia has understood what Jesus' crucifixion was all about – how exactly it fixes the problems of sin, death, and evil, and why it was necessary, or at least inevitable. I think that history is terribly interesting and relevant to the church's mission today, and encourage you to come learn about this with us. It's not too late, and there are even one or two books still available, I think. But I realize that history and theology are not everybody's cup of tea, and ultimately, it's not nearly as important to understand *how* Jesus' death and resurrection work as it is to hear and absorb the good news *that* they work, that they are God's means of saving us and the whole world. And that's what Paul is on about in today's second reading from his second letter to the Corinthians. However it works, what God is doing in Jesus is reconciling the world to God's self, repairing and healing our broken relationship with God and also our broken relationships with our fellow human beings. And Paul says that God gives us a role to play, we followers of Jesus, and that is to be ambassadors of God in this mission of reconciliation, representing God and making an appeal on God's behalf.

That's the meaning of the cross in a nutshell, you might say. But there's nothing like a good story to drive the point home. And that of course is what Jesus is doing in our Gospel reading today. What Paul does in a more abstract and intellectual way, Jesus does with a story. It is a story, though, with a particular context that is crucial to its meaning. Jesus tells it in response to the grumbling of Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders and influencers who do not approve of Jesus attracting and tolerating the wrong sorts of people. These are people whose behavior and lifestyle put them at odds with God, who have shown their disregard of God's commandments. So clearly, they think, anyone sent by God would have nothing to do with such people.

But if God's mission is all about reconciliation, as Paul says it is, then anyone sent by God would actually have *everything* to do with such people, don't you think? You can't have reconciliation if there's nothing to reconcile, if the relationship hasn't been broken. And that's where Jesus' story takes us. I say story, but actually there are three stories that Jesus tells in response to the grumbling. Two of them we skipped over in our reading. But we could have read all 32 verses of this chapter. There are longer Gospel readings in our lectionary, especially in Lent. They'll be coming around again next year. The two stories we skipped are the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. A shepherd who has a hundred sheep and loses one, Jesus says, will go searching for the lost one, even though that means leaving the other 99 for a few minutes, right? I can imagine the Scribes and Pharisees here thinking, "no, that doesn't sound like a good idea. He should stick with the 99 and cut his loses, otherwise more might get lost." Similarly, with the parable of the lost coin, where a woman loses one of her ten coins, and turns her house upside down until she has found it, I imagine the grumblers thinking, "there comes a point of diminishing returns. If you spend a day looking for a coin that amounts to a day's wage, you've actually gained nothing." But this isn't Jesus' math. The end of both of these first two parables is a party. Both the shepherd and the woman call together their friends and neighbors to rejoice with them at what has been found, and Jesus explicitly connects both of these celebrations with "joy in heaven" over a sinner who repents.

You can see, then, how these first two parables help to prepare us for the story of the prodigal son that we read for our Gospel reading. The younger son claims his inheritance, leaves

town, wastes everything away in self-indulgence, and ends up living in the worst conditions imaginable, unable to make a living wage. Then he realizes that if he's going to be a hired hand, he would be better off working for his father, who does pay a living wage and then some. So he goes home. But he knows he doesn't really have a claim on it as "home" any more, or on his father as a son. He's just going where he knows the working conditions are better. This is not yet repentance, I think, even if he is prepared to say, "father, I have sinned!"

It is the father in this story who changes everything. When he sees the son coming, he goes running out to meet him. The son says the words, "I've sinned! I'm no longer worthy to be your son." But the father doesn't accept this arrangement. "My son has come home! We need to celebrate!" Remember the lost sheep and the lost coin? It's party time.

I think that when we think about this parable, we tend to want to end it here. The son sins, the father forgives, the lost is found, a wretch is saved. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound…" But this isn't the end of the story, or its ultimate point. This story is ultimately about the older brother, the good boy who does what is expected of him, who follows all the rules, who does everything right. The father's amazing grace for the younger son exposes something rotten in the older son's relationship with his father. "All these years I have been working like a slave for you," he snaps. He too, apparently, would like to go off and party with his friends like the younger son did, and he resents that his brother got to do that and he didn't. For both sons the father has just been a means to their own ends. But the father is eager to change that, to change the attitude of both sons to him and to one another. And that is the definition of repentance.

So the father goes out to plead with the older son to come in to the party. "Don't you see that we have to celebrate? This is your brother, *your brother*, who was lost and now is found, who was effectively dead but now is alive. Come in and join the party!"

So, here's the irony. At the end of the parable it is the older son who ends up alienated from his father and his brother, and this is the message for the grumbling Scribes and Pharisees. By grumbling about Jesus and not joining in with him in eating with sinners and tax collectors, they are actually putting themselves at odds with God. They find themselves to be opposed to God and God's mission of reconciling God's self to the world God loves. *This* is where the story ends, with this plea to the older brother, which is also a plea to the Scribes and Pharisees. And, by the way, "plea" here is the same word that Paul uses in our second reading for the appeal that we make as God's ambassadors.

Of course Jesus' plea in this case doesn't work. The Scribes and the Pharisees will collude in Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. They cannot abide grace that amazing, especially when it is for someone else. But God will not let that be the end of Jesus story, or of his appeal. From the cross Jesus will forgive his crucifiers, and in his death and resurrection will undo the power of sin, death, evil.

One more thing. Did you notice the slaves in this story? They're the ones who make the reconciliation party possible, who put in the time and the effort to prepare the feast, to make the food, to adorn the beloved son with sandals and a ring. That's us, dear people. That is our task as the church. Each week, through our collective efforts, we prepare God's feast of reconciliation at the supper of our Lord. We provide a venue for lost and rebellious children to come home. And those lost and rebellious children aren't always who we expect. Sometimes they're the "good" children like us who also treat God as a means to our own ends and resent the grace shown to others. God want us at the party too, not at as slaves but as joyful members of God's family, to be reconciled with God and each other, and to rejoice with heaven in our change of heart. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.