

“Which brother are you?” Luke 13:31-35

And he [Jesus] said, “There was a man who had two sons. And 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. Not 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. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. “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! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' And 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. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But 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. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And 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.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but 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. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'”

This is one of the most powerful parables of Jesus, and one of the most well-known as well. I could add that for me and my wife this is also a summary of our lives. But there is more, we can say with certainty that this parable tells the story of everyone’s life. It is also about each of you.

You know that there is this prodigally gracious father in this parable and then there are these two brothers. By the end of the sermon we should be able to recognize which of the brothers we are.

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

You probably know that the tax collectors were among the most despised people at that time. They were perceived to be like parasites sucking blood out of their own brothers and sisters. Everyone hated them, and they had all the reasons to do it; for they were greedy and heartless people.

Who were these sinners? We can only guess. Prostitutes, outcasts, marginalized people. Don't make a mistake, they were real sinners, not some pious hypocrites saying: “O I am such a sinner, yesterday I had two glasses of wine.”

Pay attention to what Luke wrote. These people were all drawing near to hear Jesus. They knew from their first-hand experience, what sin does to us, how it destroys our personalities, our relationships, our life, our hopes for anything good.

They were thirsty and hungry to hear what Jesus had to say. ‘Whoever you are, whatever you have done, I have come to take your sins, shame, guilt, misery from you, and I give you in exchange forgiveness, God's love and I give you a new life, eternal life.’

For these people the message of Jesus literally gave a new life. The second chance, which they didn't deserve, and were not even hoping for. They were drawn to Jesus, and He welcomed them and embraced them.

The cream of the society, the Pharisees and the scribes were offended. What is He doing? He accepts people who are not worthy acceptance and love. We could say: “They don't belong in church.” What is He doing!

Jesus was doing exactly what God the Father had sent Him to do, to love and to save sinners, those who don't deserve it, who don't even dare to hope that Holy God may look at them.

Then Jesus told them this parable. “There was a man who had two sons. And 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.”

This is scandalous! This is something unheard! In that culture to ask what the youngest son asked was unthinkable. If we were to rephrase what he said so that it makes sense to us, we could put it this way: “Father, I wish you were dead, so that I can finally benefit from your possessions and do whatever I want.”

This is what he requested. No real father would ever agree to do this. In reality they may have sent him away from their family, and that would still be a very good outcome. With such an incredible offence in culture where honoring your elders

was one of the pillars of the society, this youngest son could easily have been stoned by other members of the community. But this father did something that didn't make any sense to Jesus listeners. He divided the property between his two sons.

"Not 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." He had to sell everything for there was no life for him where he had done something like that.

He sold everything quickly, probably cheaply, so that only he could quickly move away. He spit at the work of life of his father just to get a quick money to satisfy his not so noble desires. Easy money goes easily. That's what happened.

"And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything."

This is the next shocking moment in this parable. The youngest son still was a Jew. One thing is to be in a financial trouble, that's bad enough. But to humiliate himself to the extent that you agree to work with pigs, that's another level.

For the Jews pig was one of unclean animals. They didn't keep pigs, they didn't eat pigs, they would never agree to work with pigs. But this young lad not only was feeding pigs, he was longing to eat what the pigs ate, but no one would give him.

What did these few sentences mean to Jesus' listeners? That this youngest son had become like a pig himself. Not a human anymore, not a Jew, not one of God's own people, but an animal, the dirties of all, a pig.

This is what sin does to people. This is what it does both to individuals and to entire cultures. Always. The farther we depart from God in our rebellion, the more we embrace what is contrary to God's good and gracious will, the more we become like animals.

Without even noticing it. We think we are smarter than God, now we'll enjoy freedom from Him. Now we'll have a life! But ... it just doesn't work that way. I'm sure we all can come up with sad examples.

"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! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

Now we may think that the son repents and wants to return to the father. Read carefully what his thinking was. There is nothing reminding repentance. Only selfish interests.

My father's servants have bread, I don't. I'll go and try to get a job in my father's business. Sure there is a place for a confession, but that is simply a way to get what he wants.

"And 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."

This is the next shocking element in this story. Try to picture what was going on. The father saw him while he was still a long way off. How is that possible? Because the father was looking for his son. He was waiting for him to return home.

The father, who was rejected, disrespected, abandoned, was still hoping that his son will return home. And what did he do when he saw the son? He run and embraced him and kissed him.

Do you know how people used to dress those days? Yes, they wear something rather similar than pastors wear during the service. How can you run if you have a long robe? Only if you lift it up, right? How do you look when you run this way?

Ridiculous, embarrassing, that's right! This is exactly how the father looked. You know that important people don't run. This father was wealthy and respected person in his village.

Why would he be running? Because, if good people of his village would see this son returning after what he had done, they would stone him to death. The father was running for his son's life.

He had to meet him first. He had to embrace and to kiss him to show everyone that he forgives everything the son had done to him and that they are united as one family once again.

The father didn't care about his reputation, he didn't care about the son's repentance, he only care to save his life. This is what your God is like. He is ready to sacrifice everything so that only he could regain you, His lost children.

This is the Gospel. The father's attitude and actions explains what the Gospel of God's grace is. Abundant, unconditional, self-sacrificial love, that is ready to do anything to save someone, who neither deserves, nor even desires God's forgiveness.

When the father's grace was poured over the son, this is when he repented and was looking for the father's forgiveness. He was not anymore looking for job, for a way

to solve his problems, instead: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

“But 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. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'

This is how our God treats everyone who turns from their sins and seek His forgiveness. “Bring the best robe, put a ring of his hand!” The father not only humiliates himself to save the son, he not only forgives him, he also restores him back into family. This is my son, he was dead, and is alive again.

Let's celebrate! And what a celebration it was. Remember, they didn't have fridges, once they killed the animal it had to be eaten. To kill the fattener calf meant that this was to be a feast for the whole village, for the whole community.

This is what happens in heavens when one more lost sinner, one more child, who was dead in sins, returns to the Father's house. This is why we have been talking more and more that this is where our focus has to be.

To bring people from death to life, from their sinful ways, to the Kingdom of loving Father. What a tremendous joy it is, both in heavens and here, among God's people. This is what we all need to experience.

“And they began to celebrate. “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And 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.” But he was angry and refused to go in.

Now we get to the second brother. I told you in the beginning that by the end we need to be able to recognize which of the two brothers we are. Now the older brother comes home and hears what is going on and burst out in anger.

Think seriously about this. If we had sinners, real sinners, being brought to their father, here is this parish, what would our reaction be? Joy, celebration... or may be anger and disappointment. What a heck? Why should we accept this person? I know what he has done, to me and to others, I know what kind of person he is!

This was the reaction of the oldest son: “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. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”

Listen to what he said! These many years I have served you.. I never disobeyed your command. What kind of relationships does he describe? Loving son of the father? By no means. Servant, employee, hired professional.

The oldest son wasn't together with the father because he loved him, and respected him. He was together for his own benefit. Essentially, and this is one of the main points of this parable, in his heart he was no different from the other son.

See how in one breath he says that he has never disobeyed the father, and at the same time speaks as disrespectfully and accusatory as possible. He hasn't meet his brother yet, but he is quick to accuse him for spending the father's money with prostitutes. It seems, that this is what he himself would have loved to do, but hasn't.

It happens in the Church as well. Some may be here not because they love God and desire to be with Him, but because they hope that by doing certain things they will somehow benefit.

It may happen that people regularly attend the service, even take part in congregational activities, but do all of this out of wrong motivation, while their heart belong not to the Lord, but to the world.

And then, if the youngest son, someone who is real sinner comes in, then the oldest sons and daughters show their true nature. Why should we accept someone who has done this, who has lived this kind of life! If this person goes to this church, then I am not.

The oldest son refused to come in. What did the father do? He went out to him. He plead with him to come in. He patiently explained that all that is his belongs to his son, and that the reason for celebration was the fact that his brother who was dead, is now alive.

Many have wondered, what did the oldest son do? Did He come in? One of my professors gave the answer. The oldest son crucified his father. If the sinner and tax collectors where the youngest son, then the Pharisees and the scribes, that is, Jewish leaders, were the oldest.

What did they do with gracious God, who sacrificed everything so that only He could save us. They crucified Him. They couldn't bear God's grace. They couldn't accept that Jesus Christ welcomes everyone, regardless of what you have done and what kind of life you have lived.

Which brother are you? The sinner, or the moral one? Which one are you? The one who repents and rejoices in the father's love, or the one who can't accept that God welcomes those who don't deserve it?

I believe that we all have in us enough from both of them. Sometimes more of one, sometimes more of the other. Sometimes we think that we can do whatever we want, and we may get to taste what sin does to our lives.

Sometimes we think that we are fine, we are such a good Christians, not like those others. In a way it is harder if you are the oldest brother, for you think that you are OK, I have done what I was expected. What should I repent of?

The truth is, we have both brothers living in us. But the most important thing is – you are here. You have the Father. You have come to the feast, where the most gracious Father is the host.

You are here, and this is what really matters. Our Father loves both His sons. He gives everything to both of them. If you are here, it means that he has run to meet you, has embraced you and kissed you.

He has affirmed that you are His child, His heir. Now, just be willing to receive His gifts. Just let Him to love you, to bless you and to make you truly alive.

And may be, with our Father's help we can do a little running to meet those, who are still dead and lost.

Amen.