



## Gathered Together: A Lenten Journey of Love and Belonging

Fourth Sunday of Lent -March 30, 2025

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Theme for the week: A Father's Welcome

### Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

Today's Gospel kicks off with a familiar jab at Jesus: He welcomes sinners and eats with them. What they called "sinners" in Jesus' time were not people who had minor slip-ups but those who had seriously broken the laws of God. Tax collectors were considered extortioners—really unsavory characters. Their outrage that Jesus would associate with these types of people prompted him to tell the parable of the prodigal son.

The prodigal son story is really a story about a father and his two sons and his crazy, wild, passionate, fatherly love for both of them (not just the squanderer).

The younger son demands his share. The father agrees and seems pretty unemotional about it. The son just wanted out. So he left. And we know the rest. The kid spends all his money, a famine hits, and he takes work doing the unthinkable for a Jew: tending to unclean swine. When he was beyond miserable and sinking fast, he came to his senses and decided to go beg for a job from his dad.

While the younger son drafted and rehearsed the speech he planned to give to his father and walked home barefooted, we learn that the father was far from unemotional. When he saw him from a distance, he ran out to meet him. To us, this doesn't seem unusual, "he ran to his son," but well-off men of the time did NOT run. It would be considered silly and undignified to run. But he didn't care. What was in his heart went to his feet, and he ran.

Now, the older son. The stalwart son. The obedient son. He wasn't watching for his brother's return; he was busy working in the field as was expected of him. When he saw the rowdy crowd gathering for the celebration, instead of being overjoyed that his brother was home, he got mad and sulked. The father loved his oldest son enough to leave the party and beg him to have compassion for his little brother. The father was loving and kind to his eldest, who was being, for all intents and purposes, a petulant jerk.

The story's message for Jesus' critics is the same now as it was then. God loves the prodigals, the sinners, and the tax collectors. God also loves the older sons, the devout Pharisees, and the scribes. When today's "prodigals" turn to the Father, he runs out to meet them, and the celebration begins. The Father also tenderly invites the older sons of today to the feast.

This parable reminds us that the Father longs to draw us close, whether we are lost in the messiness of our own mistakes or distant because of pride and resentment. As we reflect on this story, we're also challenged to extend that same love and welcome to others who are searching for belonging—especially those who feel lost, excluded, or alone. Can we run to meet

them as the Father meets us?

## Daily Challenges

3/30/25—Today is Laetare Sunday! Laetare means "rejoice!" In the midst of your Lent sacrifices, fasts, and penances, it is a day to remember that the Easter celebration is coming. Take a moment—by yourself or with your family—and think about 5 (or more!) things that bring you joy, and thank God for them.

3/31/25—Read and pray with Psalm 51 in light of the story of the prodigal son. Then, in your own words, pour your heart out to the Father, thanking him for his mercy and forgiveness.

4/1/25—Reflect on a time when you felt resentful or distant from others. Today, focus on extending compassion to those who seem judgmental or unapproachable.

4/2/25—Share a "Lent update" with a friend or on social media. What is God showing you?

4/3/25—Take some time today to reflect on a relationship in your life that needs healing. Ask God to soften your heart in this area.

4/4/25—Pray a "Hail Mary" after your dinner prayer for a special family intention. *Don't forget: today is a day to abstain from meat.*

4/5/25—Prepare for the Fifth Sunday of Lent by reading the Gospel, John 8:1-11