

“PIGPENS AND HOG HEAVEN” Luke 15:1-3; 11-32

How would you describe the absolutely lowest point that a person could reach in this life? What would be the worst situation of which you could conceive? It seems to me that Jesus was trying very hard to describe just such a worst possible scenario in the parable we have read today from Luke’s Gospel. Think about the condition of the younger son when he was in that pigpen. He was out of money and destitute. He was starving along with everyone else. He had no friends. He was a long way from home, and he was doing the most unpleasant and despicable work that a good Jewish boy could possibly imagine—slopping hogs. The shame, the degradation, and the desperation of his circumstances could not possibly have been worse. In addition, this young man had to feel pretty stupid, for his own foolishness had gotten him into that mess. Yes, he was as low as low could be.

Now, I don’t want to be prejudicial against hogs and the folks who raise them. I like ham and bacon and sausage as well as anybody, and we don’t think of pork as unclean like the Jews did and do. I’m sure that some of you have had to feed the pigs in your day, and I even knew a fellow who had his Ph. D. in swinology. Nevertheless, for the purpose of our thinking together this morning, and to help illustrate our human condition, I’m going to say that when our lives are messed up; when we are in real trouble and desperately need some help that we are in the pigpen. Furthermore, I am also saying that we ought to get out of our pignpens and try to clean up and straighten up our lives.

What kind of pigpen do you know about? Have you been in one, or are you in one now? We are in a pigpen when we are away from God. Whenever we have strayed away from God and find ourselves in a mess, then we can surely call it a pigpen. It is unpleasant, shameful, hard, unrewarding, lonesome, dirty, tiring, boring, and very dissatisfying in the pigpens into which we can get. That certainly describes the situation of the younger son in Jesus' parable, as he found himself tending the swine in that far country. However, I also want to suggest that the elder brother was in just as much of a pigpen as his sibling. It was not so literal, but it was just as real. In his unforgiving, callous, and mean spirited attitudes, the elder son was mired in the pigpen of resentment toward his father and his brother. Hence, we need to see that one does not have to run away to get into a pigpen; we can get sidetracked into pigpens through our thoughts and feelings and attitudes, too.

If we are honest with ourselves, then we will all have to admit that we know something about being stuck in the pigpens of life. It may be worry, it may be envy, it may be pride, it may be illicit sex, it may be drunkenness or gluttony or lying or cheating, or it may be vanity. Regardless of the exact nature, every pigpen of life is built with a fence of alienation from God and consists of the muddy dirt of sinfulness. You and I need to get out of life's pigpens, and Jesus told us how in this parable.

The only starting place for getting out of a pigpen is to realize that you are in it. That sounds easy enough, doesn't it? However, there are a whole lot of folks in this world who are stuck in the pigpens of sin, but think

that they are in hog heaven! Dirty living may be heaven for hogs, but it is not for humans. While in the pigpen, the younger son came to himself; he realized what a mess he was in, and he decided to do something about getting out. Like this young man, you and I can go home, for like him, we, too, have a loving Father. The good news of this parable is that our loving Father is always there to meet us, indeed to run down the road to receive us, and to rejoice over our homecoming.

This parable has been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. For a long time, I didn't really know what that meant. I guessed that prodigal meant runaway; only recently did I learn that prodigal literally means wasteful. The younger son wasted all his money in loose living; he was therefore prodigal. However, in all reality, the parable is poorly named. The focus is not on the younger son at all, but on the father, who had love enough and to spare for both his sons. This is a parable about the love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness of God, and it ought to be called the Parable of the Loving Father.

What Jesus was trying to tell us is that there is nothing we can do, there is no pigpen so dirty, there is simply and absolutely no way that we can make God quit loving us. That is the unqualified nature of the gospel. No sin is so bad that God will not forgive us, if we come home to him and ask for his mercy. Can you really imagine such love? It's hard for us humans to believe in such grace, isn't it? We have known too many cases where the love of a father or a mother was not so unlimited. How sad it is to hear of a parent disowning a child.

Hear the good news today. There is nothing in your life so dirty that God cannot clean it up. You cannot get far enough away from God that he will quit loving you and hoping that you come home. God's love is infinitely perfect, and he is ready to rejoice whenever we come to ourselves and start home.

As an offshoot from its central focus on the loving nature of God, this parable also deals with self-identity. It is important for us to remember who we are. We may be in a far country, we may be in a pigpen, or we may be at home, but we do need to remember that we are sons and daughters of God. The younger son did this; he remembered his identity as the son of a loving father. In humility he went home hoping that his father would have enough pity on him to give him a job as a hired hand. ((Realizing our identity as the true sons and daughters of God is a most important message for our Seniors today. You young people need always to remember that you have a loving Heavenly Father, who will never leave you nor forsake you. Keep this parable in mind. Every person I know needs to find their true identity as a child of God.)) The coming of Christ ushered in the New Age, and new creation has become a reality in Jesus. Now it is possible for you and for me to become new creatures through the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus. This newness of life involves an inner transformation, and this is what the younger son did in coming to himself. It is what the elder son did not do in resenting his father's joy over his brother's return.

All of this newness is from God. Grace enables us to be reborn, recreated, and renewed. The father did not have to receive his son home—he did not even have to hire him as a servant. But he did, because he loved him. Re-creation takes the form of reconciliation. It is being taken back into a covenant relationship with God. Our enmity with God, our sin, and our rebellion against his goodness are all replaced by friendship with God, along with love and forgiveness.

Jesus believed that we are not truly ourselves when we are running away or staying away from God. When anything is separating us from God, then we are in a mess—in the pigpen, if you will. You and I are only fully human and fully ourselves when we are on the way home toward God. Jesus has promised us that when we turn to God, God will forgive us with no recriminations. The father in the parable could so easily have said, “I told you so. I told you that you were being foolish to leave home. I told you that you would come to no good.” Likewise, he could have made his forgiveness conditional. He could have said, “I’ll think about taking you back if you’ll work really hard for the next year or two.” But, No! There were no strings attached to his mercy; there were no conditions upon his love. With joy the father called for a ring, a robe, shoes, and the fatted calf. It was right to celebrate for the son had come home!

Every time that I think about this parable, I wonder about the elder brother. I have a feeling that many of us can identify more with him than with the younger son. Surely, Jesus was trying to make an important point by

including him in the story. Pride was the sinful pigpen in which this young man was stuck. I imagine that he had been prideful in a competitive way toward his younger brother all his life. He probably became very puffed up with pride when he was the only son left at home doing his duty. Then he had no one with whom to compete, and he must have felt smug over the departure of his brother. He could take pride in being a more dutiful son than the prodigal. But then the younger brother returned and was accepted back as a full-fledged son. The elder must surely have felt slighted and put down. His pride was hurt. He wouldn't want his brother home at all, but if he did come back, he would not want to see this wastrel reinstated as a son. Maybe he would want to have the younger brother as his own personal servant in order to be able to lord over him. Pride is always competitive, always wanting more and better things and higher position than anyone else has. Because of his hurt pride, the older son could not rejoice with his father that the lost son had returned safely.

Finally, I want to lift up the radical nature of this parable. Jesus was himself radical in associating with the tax collectors and sinners. That was what got him into trouble with the Pharisees, and their criticism of him prompted the telling of this story. We need to remember that the tax collectors were traitors to the Jews, collaborating with the Romans to collect high taxes and profiting nicely by it. Sinners were folks who had been so bad that they had been thrown out of their synagogues. For Jesus to associate with

and eat with them showed that he accepted them. Again, this demonstrates for us that we cannot get so bad that God will not reach out to us.

The parable itself was and is radical, because the younger son had declined to the status of a nobody, a Gentile, an outsider. He had given up all his rights, even embarrassing his father by asking for his share of property. The young man came home in shame, because of his stupid and sinful behavior. Yet the father was extravagant in his welcome home. Giving the son a ring, shoes, and a robe immediately rolled away his shame and restored him as a son. Having a party was going far beyond what was expected or even hoped for by the son. Indeed, the party was offensive. It was offensive to the elder son, and it was offensive to the Pharisees. The father was a both/and person; he refused to be either/or. He went out to both his sons; he had enough love for both of them, just as God has enough for each one of us. Love is always inclusive and never exclusive. We don't have to compete with anybody else for God's love, for he has an unlimited supply—enough for every person under the sun.

Today, whether you think that you are in hog heaven or know that you are mired in a pigpen, turn back to God. Call upon him in repentance and faith—come to yourself and remember that you have a loving father who has an abundant supply of all that you need. Let's go home to God today; we will know the blessing of being received back as full heirs of the kingdom, all our

shame will be rolled away, and our joy will be unbounded. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.