The parable of the Prodigal Son… It has to be one of the most beloved stories in the Bible – a story that we teach our children – one that seems easy to get our hands around and understand. It’s a story that makes us feel good. So, this morning is a wonderful invitation for us to dig into it again – and see what the Holy Spirit is telling us through it – today. +++ Now, like a good poet, Luke isn’t one to waste any words… so I think it’s important for us not to overlook anything – including his short introduction to the parable, where he sets the scene of Jesus and his listeners. It almost seems irrelevant, like “once upon a time.” But, let me take a cue from Luke and consider the scene again, to see if there is anything important going on there: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 But the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ 3 So he told them this parable:”…

So, Jesus’ audience was two very different groups of people. On the one hand, there are the outcasts – the sinners and tax collectors who knew they had wandered from the righteous path, yet they were the ones coming near to Jesus, to listen to him. Then there were the Pharisees who were famous for never straying from their steadfast righteousness; yet they stood back and criticized Jesus for talking to sinners. They thought they already knew all the rules and couldn’t see that Jesus was revealing something new about God’s love… and compassion.

Why does Luke frame the parable with sinners and Pharisees? What do they have to do with the Prodigal Son? +++ What do they have to do with us?

The Prodigal Son is such a rich lesson of love and forgiveness. Since I was a child, whenever I hear this story, I’ve wondered who I’m supposed to identify with in the story. … Should I learn from my mistakes and repent, as the Younger Son seems to do?… Or, maybe there’s a lesson here about the virtues of staying behind and being reliable, like the Older Son… Perhaps the real message is that we should all show love like the Father? … Or, is it, somehow, a combination of all 3?? … Who is the story actually about?? Who is the main character?? +++ There are lots of good visual images in the story: we’ve seen paintings of the Younger Brother feeding the pigs, all muddy and hungry… or when he meets his Father on the road and gets a long-overdue embrace. +++ But, for some reason, the one that has always haunted me the most is an image of the Older Brother standing in the field at the end, refusing to join the party. +++ He seems so alone. +++ I could never quite get my hands around what was holding him back. +++ That felt important.

+++ So, this morning I’d like to look at each of the characters with you – and think about what they mean to the story, and what they might mean for us. +++ After blowing through his inheritance, the Younger Son is forced to return home and face his Father. First, he prepares and rehearses a speech, but we are never really sure if he means it. Has he really even repented? All we know is that he is out of money and hungry and he calculates that his Father would never let him suffer like this if he were at home. +++ So, he makes his plan: “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” +++ The way he plans exactly what to say reminds me of movies when someone practices breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, in front of a mirror – “It’s not you, it’s me.” “It’s not you, it’s me.” +++ I think he’s truly when his Father never even seems to hear the confession anyway. Having him home is all the father wants. +++ Before the Younger Son knew what was happening, he was swept up into the middle of a celebration. Basking in his Father’s love. He did not understand what was happening. All he had to do was go to the party – no questions asked – and he went.

+++ Now, the story of the Older Son is a bit more complicated. He was a typical oldest child – if any of you are one, or know one, you might know what I mean. Responsible, Self-Disciplined, Focused on the Rules… And, he just couldn’t understand when his Father showed compassion for his brother who had been long-lost to his sinful ways. +++ (Come to think of it, he sounds a lot like those law-abiding Pharisees, doesn’t he?... The ones who
couldn’t understand why Jesus had compassion for Sinners.) +++ He seems so unhappy for someone who was so steady and predictable… +++ In his landmark study of the parable, called “The Return of the Prodigal Son,” Henri Nouwen wrote, “Not only did the younger son, who left home to look for freedom and happiness in a distant country, get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man. Exteriory he did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but, interiorily, he wandered away from his father. He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree.” +++ Finally, when his Father comes to him in the field and pleads with him to join the party, he cannot see past his own anger. Why couldn’t his Father see his loyalty, he must have wondered:: “Does he not understand how hard I’ve worked, why I deserve so much more than my brother?” But, how [could he return] when he was so lost in resentment,… caught in jealousy,… imprisoned in obedience … [that felt more like]… slavery?”

*Like his brother, he did not understand what was happening…. All he had to do was go to the party – no questions asked – but he did NOT go.* Instead, the Older Son dug in his heels. Until he could let go of his resentment and anger he would never be able to see that his Father was revealing something new about love and compassion.

Finally, let’s consider the hero of our story. The Father does not just show love and forgive his sons for their behavior. *It actually seems like he can barely control himself* whenever he is around them because he loves them so much. The Father saw his son from far away “and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him,” and then threw a party. There is no moderation in his love – he’s all-in all the time.

I think this is how most parents feel about their children. I remember amusing myself a few years ago when I caught myself acting that way. As most of you know, our older daughter Emily and I both attended Princeton Seminary at the same time, with my last year being her first year. One day during a break, I was standing at a classroom window looking out over the quad, when I saw Emily walking on the sidewalk right in front of me. As she approached her dorm to enter the back door, I sent her a text message: *[act it out with phone]* “I see you – right now!!” She responded: “Okay…??” “I’m standing in Shiede Hall, in the Gambrell Room, and you just walked right past me.” “Okay…. did you need me for something?” “No. It just made me think about you… I wanted to tell you.” “Cool, Dad. I’m kinda busy, so… see you later.” …….. For a moment, I had forgotten all about my class,… (not to mention my dignity).

This is how the Father in our parable reacts when he sees his sons. After greeting his younger son with hugs and kisses, he does not even listen to the excuses – the memorized speech – before planning for a party. It doesn’t matter! There’s no weighing evidence based on the confession. There’s no deliberation to see if the son will be allowed to return. There’s no thought of treating him like a hired hand. +++ His son is home – that’s all that matters. *It’s not about accountability. It’s not about sin. It’s really not even about forgiveness. +++ Ultimately, it’s about love. Immeasurable, uncontrollable love.*

And how does the Father respond to the Older Son? With the same compassion he had shown to the Younger Son. He runs out to the field to him, to see what’s wrong. When he saw the Older Son’s anger and pain, he pleads with him to come into the party. He explained about being lost… and found. +++ But his son was not ready to understand this kind of extravagant love – and instead of trying, he closes himself off from it. +++ And so he remains outside…. All alone.

In their own way, each of the brothers has become lost by separating himself from their Father’s love:: 1 one by distance and sin – the other by resentment and pride. +++ The Sinners and Tax Collectors had also been lost. The Pharisees were lost. They all needed the Father’s embrace, too. And his immeasurable, uncontrollable love.

And what about *us*?... Don’t we get lost as well?... Do we squander our inheritance as children of God?... Do we practice excuses for our shortcomings and then try to recite them to God in prayer?... Do we feel so righteous from our good works, or maybe because we go to church, that we think we deserve something back from God –
some special status, or promise? Maybe we remain standing stubbornly in the field alone, because we don’t understand our Father’s love… or we are in pain we don’t deserve… or we are filled with pride we cannot let go of.+++ So we dig in our heels – and we refuse to follow our Father into the party. +++ +++ Do we separate ourselves from God like the Older Son?

And how does the Lord respond to us? Does our God wait for us to get all of this worked out for ourselves? Do we have to make all the right confessions and let go of our pride before God allows us home? NO! Because, ultimately, it’s not about sin and forgiveness. It’s about love. Immeasurable, uncontrollable love. +++ The GOOD NEWS is:: Jesus Christ reveals God’s extravagant love and compassion for us. Our Father drops everything and runs to us.+++ …Does not wait to hear our excuses before planning the celebration. …Kills the fatted calf. …Pleads with us to follow him home. +++ Our Father lavishes great, overpowering, unexplainable grace just because we are God’s children. … Christ invites everyone to that party.

There was a choice facing the Pharisees and scribes that day, as they witnessed Jesus Christ changing the world through the extravagant love of God. They only had to see that Jesus was the new revelation of God’s Truth, pleading with them to join party… – They only had to listen to him as the Sinners and Tax Collectors had done – and a fatted calf would be prepared for them as well… But they refused, … they dug in their heels,… and turned away from his love.

And, now… here we are. Christ is in OUR world changing it every day. May you be daring enough to know his love… To let go of your belief that you have to somehow “get it right” to be acceptable to him… that you have to explain away your faults…. Because ultimately, your God offers something beyond accountability,… beyond sin, or even forgiveness. Your God offers love. Immeasurable, uncontrollable, irresistible love. May you accept his perfect grace, which has no strings attached.

You’ve been invited. Standing alone, out in the field. +++ Look toward the house – the warm lights are glowing.+++ Listen +++ – you can hear the music playing and the sound of laughter. +++ Smell the fatted calf on the grill, and your mouth waters. +++ “Our Father” waves at you from the door, beckoning you to let it all go – forgive yourself, let go of your pain, receive his grace. +++ Just come home.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.