

Sermon Title: **“Between the Prodigal Son and the Elder Son”**

Bible: **Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

When: on the 4th Sunday in Lent, March 27th, 2022

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube live streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord, during this Lenten season, we come to you, because we are always your children. Please help us to open our hands and minds to receive your grace more and more. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **1. Luke 15**

Today’s Gospel reading from Luke is Chapter 15. It is the parable of the prodigal son. Do you like this story? Do you think that it is fair to accept the lost son? Can you understand the mercy and grace of the father? Have you been in the shoes of the prodigal son? Can you return to God? How about the elder son? Does the return of the prodigal son bother you? Can you rejoice in the return of the prodigal son?

If we see this parable in the context of the whole chapter 15 of Luke, it is the last parable. Luke 15 contains three lost and found parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. When people complained that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them, Jesus shared these three lost and found parables. And the parable of the prodigal son is the conclusion of this chapter.

## **2. The Parable of the Prodigal Son**

A father had two sons. The young son requested to receive his inheritance first before his father passed away. This could be considered disrespectful to the father. He might have some stories behind his reason for asking this. We do not know why the younger son did this. But surprisingly, the father divided the property and gave the younger son his share. The younger son left home, and spent all of what he had. When he became destitute, the only work he could find was tending to pigs, feeding them, and living with them. At that time, pigs were considered unclean animals, according to Hebrew religious law.

When the younger son realized what he had done, he came to himself, and he decided to return to the father, not as a son, but as the lowest of the low. He even practiced what he would say to the father. On his way back home, his father was waiting for his lost son. The son could not finish saying what he had practiced. Before he could, the father ran to his son, hugged and kissed him. The celebration began as soon as the son returned. I wish that this story would end here. The parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin ended with joy. There was no more to the story in the first two parables. But the story of this lost son continued. The elder son came in and got angry. “It is not fair.” “Why for him?” “Why not for me?” The elder son could not rejoice! If you were in this story, which one would you be? Do you identify with the younger and lost son, the elder son, or the father? Or someone else?

## **3. Between the Prodigal Son and the Elder Son**

In my faith journey, it is not easy for me to identify with the younger son, because I was born and raised in a Christian family. I was kind of an obedient Christian, too. But when I was studying theologies in college and the seminary, I felt like a prodigal son. That's because my faith was shaken, broken, and destroyed. When I studied the Bible and theologies, not only many questions but also a lot of doubts came to me. I had grown up thinking that at least the Bible was perfect and 100% of the factual truth without any faults. Like a doubting Thomas, I began to doubt the presence of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There was not only one absolute interpretation of the Bible. In our church history, in the name of God, our faith ancestors, we, and our church oppressed others rather than liberating them. I could not understand the power of evil on the earth. Where is God's victory? I could not understand the sufferings on the earth, especially of the innocent. Where is God when there is suffering? It felt like my whole world was broken. I thought I could do something without God. But there was a moment when I came to myself. I opened my hands, because I needed help. I brought my doubts to God. I expressed my sorrows and even angers toward God. Like the lost son, I met my God, and I was accepted. I am still struggling with many questions. But I do not doubt the presence of God, even when I cannot feel and experience it.

Because I am a lifelong Christian, and after I became a pastor, I tend to identify with the elder son. Rather than opening my hands, I tend to close my hands and my mind. Sometimes, I forget the beginning of my faith journey, when I had many questions and doubts. I forget the God that I met with many doubts. I forget the gentleness and the patience of God. Just

like God was waiting for me, God is waiting for others. But I forget this a lot. That's why sometimes, I find myself as grumpy, like the elder son.

#### **4. Grace**

In the United Methodist Church, grace is the most important topic. Even though grace cannot be divided, there are three graces: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. God prepares us, redeems us, and shapes us. God is waiting for us all the time, and God is with us. When we come to ourselves, when we come to God, God will redeem us. At that moment God will come to us and embrace us, as who we are. We should and will celebrate the joy of salvation, a new beginning, healing, and finding meanings! And with the gift of grace, we can be more like Jesus, as God shapes and molds us. This is all of our faith journey by grace. The grace is there all the time. When we open our hands, we can receive it. When we get lost, we can open our hands. Then, we can receive God's grace. Even after we are found, we can open our hands. Then, God will hold our hands. We can hold others' hands. When we open our hands, God will lead all of us to God's way and God's will.

When we close our hands, we cannot receive anything, and we cannot be used by God. Aren't we vulnerable? Aren't we broken? God is waiting for us. That's because we are children of God. In the parables of the lost and found, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son all belong to God at the first. We are already God's children. And even when we lose ourselves, God is searching us, waiting for us, and finding us. But God is gentle and patient. God does not force us to open our hands or to return. When we come to ourselves, it is okay

to open our hands and return to God. Just open our hands and open our minds. Then, the joy of the celebration, the joy of our faith journey will start!

### **Closing Prayer**

Gracious God, it is all because of your grace. Because you love us, we come to you. Because you love us, we celebrate the joy of salvation. Because you love us, we want to follow your will and way. Please help us to open our hands to receive your grace more and more. In Jesus' name. Amen.