

Text: Luke 15:11-32.

Fourth Sunday in Lent.

March 31, 2019.

God's amazing grace is like nothing else. Amen.

This will be a sermon like no other. Sorry, not going to be that much better. And really sorry, not going to be that much shorter. But this story Jesus tells is like no other, so we are just going to jump right in, repeat a lot of Jesus' words. There are three main characters in this story. The father stands for God. The younger son for open sinners. The older son stands for hidden sinners. There's actually one thing that will be like every other sermon: we will see God's love. God's love is like no other love, like no other person. God's love is like no other.

There was a man who had two sons. Notice two sons. Maybe you've heard this story before and the focus is usually on the younger son. But Jesus wants us to give attention to both sons. Both were lost in their own way and their own time. Both were loved by their father, with a love like no other.

The younger one says to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." Whoa! This didn't usually happen until the father died. So the younger son was saying, and pretty openly, "Dad, I wish you were dead. But since you're not, can you just give me what I have coming and let me go on my way? I'm tired of your rules. I'm tired of you. I want to do my own thing and live my own way and have my freedom." And can you believe the father does it? He divides the property. Why? He just gave the younger son rope to hang himself. And he did. Did he want this son to see it was better to be with dad than without him, that his father's love was really a love like no other?

Well, didn't take long. He took the stuff, took off, blew it all. One sentence. Quick and easy to blow it all. We probably can't imagine anything worse than he actually did. This was disrespect like no other. Dad, wish you were dead. Let me go. And to squander inheritance just wasn't done. It was a great shame, like no other.

Murphy's law shows up. Famine. No more friends when the money is gone. He latches onto, glues himself to, some citizen. Maybe this guy doesn't want him around, but sent him to feed the pigs. Yuck! Gross! Feed pigs! You've got to be kidding me. Pigs! Pigs were the worst of the worst. Pigs were unclean for Jews. This son would never be clean, literally and never be clean, ritually. He could never go to the temple, never seek help in a synagogue. And worse than that, he didn't even get food for his labor. He wanted to eat the pods that the pigs ate. Nasty! Can you see him putting his face in the trough with the pigs? The story could end right there and that would be quite a lesson.

Can you see yourself in this son? Probably never ate pods with the pigs, but disrespect for mom and dad? Wished they were dead? Thought you'd be better on your own, no rules, just freedom? Found out later that didn't turn out so well? How many times put a \$20 or a \$50 or just gave your credit card to the bartender and wouldn't want to stand up here and tell what happened later, if you even remember.

But Jesus didn't stop the story there. There's a twist, as there usually is with Jesus' stories. Actually, I think you'll hear a couple more twists if you listen carefully. But here's the first twist. He comes to his senses. He makes a realization like no other. My father's workers have food. And I'm starving! I'll come clean. I'll go back. He prepares. He practices. This is an amazing confession, but it's not a confession like no other. It's really a confession just like ours, like the confession we make every week here in worship and I pray you make every day. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." God, all my sins are against you. And many of those sins were also against others. "I am no longer worthy to be called

your son." Wow! I blew it. I screwed up. I thought I was better on my own. It took my own stupidity and my own starvation to realize, "I had it better with you than I do now without you." I can't demand anything. Just let me be close to you. Just make me a hired man. And you can hear him reciting this all the way home. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men." And he's trying to work up the courage to say this out loud. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men."

He's pacing. He's practicing. He's still a long way off. While he is still a long way off, his father sees him. Dad was waiting. Watching. Yearning. Longing. There's no chance he's coming back. But maybe there's a chance. Can you see the father's tears when he sees his son? Does your own heart beat faster to feel what the father feels? The deepest part of him has been empty, every day, since he left. His stomach has been churning, non-stop. Dad just hasn't been the same. But now! There's my son. My son! Old men didn't run. It wasn't dignified. But darn it if I'll be dignified. This is my son. He runs. As fast as he can, with the tears flowing down. He grabs him. He kisses him. He won't let him go.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And the father cuts him off. Before he can say anymore, dad butts in. We are not going to hear any of this hired man business. I'm not listening to any of this not my son stuff. With no rebuke. With no scolding. And with the tears still in his eyes and his son still safely in his arms, dad cries out, "Quick! Hurry! Give him the best robe." This is my son. "Put a ring on his finger." Rings were used like your signature. Given only to special family members. "Put shoes on his feet." Hired men went barefoot. Not my son. Love like no other.

Love that spared no expense. The best robe. The finest ring. The fanciest shoes. The most expensive food. The feasiest feast. Let's party! Let's celebrate! Stop working! Party! Celebrate!!!! Love like no other. Why? This son of mine, always was my son, always will be my son, was dead and is alive again. Did you hear that? Dead? And raised to life. Lost and is found. I don't think we need to get all theoretical and theological here. But it's no coincidence that God says we are all dead, by nature, in our sins. Only Jesus' love makes us alive. Only his resurrection gives us life. All of us are lost, on our own, lost in life and headed for hell. But we are all loved, loved by a Father who is like no other. He doesn't care about your past. He cares about his present, his present love, his present of forgiveness, his love like no other that saw you when you were still a long way off, that found you when you wanted to stay lost, that brought you to your senses, when you had no sense.

This made me think, "Maybe we need to have a come back Sunday, find a family member who hasn't been to church in a while. Invite 'em back. God has never stopped loving. Find a friend who's a little rough around the edges, might say a few words you haven't heard in church before. God has never stopped forgiving. I'm not worthy to be called God's child. Neither are you. Neither is that precious son, that precious soul that's straying from God. This made me think that at every new member welcome, we ought to serve prime rib. For everybody. Every new member party, surf and turf, steak and shrimp, the best of the best. I know the treasurer is having a heart attack. But every soul is so precious to God, his love is like no other.

And the story could end there and there would be plenty of lessons. And the camera fades away from the party and the music and the dancing. Happy ending. The end. But Jesus has another twist. A party pooper. Remember, the man has two sons. And we just might identify more with the older son. He's

sad. He's self-righteous like no other. He's outwardly with the church, but inwardly without faith. He's out in the field, working, what the self-righteous are always doing. He hears the music and dancing. He doesn't join the party, but calls a servant and asks what's going on. There's joy in the report. "Your brother has come! He's safe and sound! Your father has killed the fattened calf. Come to the party, man!" His reaction? He's angry! Angry! So angry. He's not willing to go in. He refuses to join the party. He was so perturbed he passed on participating in the prime rib party. When love for a brother has left the heart, there is no joy in the heart. When the mind thinks God's love has to be earned, there is no joy that God's love is given. When the soul feels that God is stingy with love, grudgingly tossing a few slivers to the select few who worked hard enough for it, that soul begrudges God being so free, so reckless with his love. This son seems more lost than the younger son ever was.

But there's another twist. The father shows the same, like-no-other kind of love to the older son. The father leaves the party. The father pleads with him. The father begs him to come and celebrate. But this son of self-righteousness will have nothing to do with this free love, this cheap grace. "Look here!" He doesn't address him politely with father, or sir. Then the exaggeration begins. "All these years I've been a slave. Slaving for you! I never disobeyed your orders, not once." "Never broke a single command, really? There's a great irony here when we remember the father is God and the greatest commandment of God is love God and the second one is love your neighbor. He claims he's kept them all, but he hasn't kept the top two. I never got a young goat. Yeah, never mind the food and shelter all these years and you have the bigger share of the inheritance waiting.

And did you catch the contempt? Everyone else calls him, "Your brother," reminding the older son of his relationship to him. The older son calls him, "This, son, of yours." "This," as a form of address, was often used with contempt. Jesus' enemies did it. He's only the father's son. Not my brother.

The father still shows love, like no other. "Son," he calls him. The word of tender affection and love. "Everything I have is yours." All the riches. All the calves. All the kids. All my love. All my forgiveness. It's all yours. I've never stopped loving you. I've never stopped appreciating you. The father showed as much grace to this lost son as to the other lost son.

But come on, we had to, it was necessary to rejoice and be glad. This brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. The father's refrain of a love like no other. He was dead. He's alive again. He was lost. He is found. I know I have this apparently rude habit in the church entryway of cutting off conversations with long-time members midsentence when I see someone new walk in. I won't apologize. But I do want you to understand. I love our long time members. Always have. Always will. All God's love and forgiveness is always yours. We don't have a church and I don't have a job without you. But we can't let one lost soul enter without seeing God's love and our love for lost souls. We can't miss one chance to share with a lost soul God's love, that is like no other. We have to rejoice and be glad. We have to celebrate when there's one more soul in worship, one more precious soul in Bible 101, because God rejoices when one more dead is alive again, when one more lost is found. There's a love. Like no other. Amen.

God's amazing love is always yours. Amen.