

11 March 2026  
Lent 3 Midweek

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Icons of Repentance: The Lost Son - The Father’s Love”  
Text: Luke 15:11-32; Isaiah 55:1-11; Romans 8:31-39

In the Name of (+) Jesus. Amen.

We heard another very familiar story tonight as our next *Icon of Repentance* - the parable of the Lost Son, or the Prodigal Son. It is a story you know well. It is a story that you have perhaps lived at one time or another in your life. Wandering from God, or even rejecting God and His love and life for you. And even if you haven’t gone full prodigal, you have a little. We all have. Taken God’s gifts and used them in ways that are not good. And for this we all need to repent.

But what I want to focus on tonight is not the younger son’s prodigality, but the love of his father that enabled him to return.

This love Paul spoke of in the Epistle tonight from Romans, when he asked: ***Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*** The love of Christ, which is the love of the Father for us in sending His Son.

The younger son certainly tried to! He separated himself as far as possible from his father’s love - both emotionally and physically. **Emotionally**, when he treated his father as dead in asking for his inheritance immediately. And **physically**, when he took his inheritance, cashed it in, and journeyed into a far country. *Far*. Where no one would know him or his father. Where he found the love of new friends - *better* love, he thought. But, it turns out, love that was only there when he had a pocketful of money and was the life of the party.

But when he no longer was and the money ran out, where were they then? Where were they when he needed them? When he needed even just a scrap of food? They were no longer to be found. They moved on to the next person who would give them what they wanted. But the son . . . he had no place to go, no one to turn to . . .

*Until he remembered his father’s heart.* His father who treated even his servants generously. Who was steadfast and reliable.

So back to Paul and our reading from Romans . . . ***Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or***

*nakedness, or danger, or sword?* This son had nearly all of that! And then Paul tells us: **NO! Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

And that's what the Lost Son found out. He returned home with his tail between his legs, and was overwhelmed. The love he needed, the love he had been looking for, the love he had spurned, was there for him all along. When he was in his greatest need, it was the father he had wished dead - but glad he was not! The father he wished dead did not just bail him out with a job or a loan, but *welcomed him home*. Welcomed him back into the family.

***In all these things we are more than conquerors***, Paul says - not because these things - these misfortunes and trials and dangers - won't happen to us. They do! Sometimes because of the actions of others, but sometimes (like with the younger son) by our own fault. But when they do, we are conquerors because there is something we can depend on, and rely on, and that is the love of the father. Our heavenly Father, who gives us the victory that He gave His Son - *in love* - to win for us. The victory of forgiveness. The victory of redemption.

Now think about the words from the prophet Isaiah we heard tonight and how *they* apply to this story and situation.

***Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?***

The Lost Son spent all his money on that which does not satisfy and had nothing left. But there is food and drink for *him who has no money*, and for us in our spiritual poverty . . . not because it isn't worth anything! But because it's from the Father, and was bought and paid for *for us* by the blood of Jesus.

Isaiah continues . . .

***Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.***

The Lost Son did this - forsook his way and his unrighteous thoughts and returned. But that's only half the story. Notice the words of promise here! That ***our God WILL***

*pardon* - not may, not might, no uncertainty. He **WILL** pardon. But not *just* pardon! He will **ABUNDANTLY** pardon! However great your sins, however many your sins, however grievous your sins, they are not too great, too many, or too grievous for the love and forgiveness of your Father. The Lost Son needed such abundant forgiveness, and it was there for him. And it is here for us. Our Father is not stingy with His gifts or with His forgiveness. It is lavish. It is abundant. The blood of Jesus covers all sin.

Which is perhaps hard for us to wrap our minds around, because that's certainly not how things work in the world! Or even with us. How hard it is to sometimes forgive those who sin against us *just a little!* And that can make us afraid to repent, afraid to confess. Thinking that we have to do *something* first - at least a little. But no. God isn't like us. Which is a good thing! He doesn't think like us, act like us, as Isaiah goes on to say . . .

***For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.***

Abundant forgiveness isn't in our sinful DNA! But it is God's DNA. It is who He is. His love steadfast and eternal. His forgiveness greater than we can imagine. Which even if we cannot understand, we can believe, by the work of this Spirit in us. Believe the words and promises of God, which do their work in us, as Isaiah goes on to say . . .

***For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven  
and do not return there but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.***

And what is that purpose for which God sends His Word? His Word proclaimed and His Word made flesh? To work faith in us. To work salvation, in the forgiveness of our sins.

So it is the steadfast, everlasting love of the Father that enables us to return to Him in repentance. To return to His love that is always there for us. His love which our sins are not able to take away. He doesn't like our sins. He mourns our sins. They are

not good for us. But still His love for us is there. And not just for the Lost Son, but for the older son, too, who also had a problem with his father.

And so as we sang in the Psalm tonight, what has the Father done?

***You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;  
you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness,  
that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.  
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!***

That was certainly true for the Lost Son. The father celebrated his son with music and dancing and feasting. He re-clothed his son. The son celebrated his father's abundant love and forgiveness. Joy that is here for us, too. Joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Joy in us over all our sins forgiven. Joy which then enables us to love and forgive the same. With abundance.

And though we are not told in the parable, though we don't find out anything else about the younger-now-restored-son - such love produces love, and the fruits of faith and praise. I imagine that now the son had good things to say about his father, not wishing him dead anymore, but marveling in his father's abundant and steadfast love.

And us, too. Abundant pardon produces abundant fruit in our hearts and lives. But that's what we're going to think more about next week. For now, let this be on our hearts and minds tonight: the steadfast love of the Lord and His abundant forgiveness. And our **third icon of repentance**: the Lost Son, but also his faithful and loving father. For He is the Father of us lost sons, too.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.