*Look upon us, O Lord,*

*and let all the darkness of our souls*

*vanish before the beams of thy brightness.*

*Fill us with holy love,*

*and open to us the treasures of thy wisdom.*

*All our desire is known unto thee,*

*therefore perfect what thou hast begun,*

*and what thy Spirit has awakened us to ask in prayer.*

*We seek thy face,*

*turn thy face unto us and show us thy glory.*

*Then shall our longing be satisfied,*

*and our peace shall be perfect*

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

Good morning! Good morning at home!

Well, my friends, we've made it past the halfway point of the Lenten season. Now's when we might be making plans for which services during Holy Week to attend (hint: all of them), or what to make for Easter lunch. We might be looking forward to reincorporating whatever we took out of our daily lives for a Lenten abstinence, or perhaps relenting on an added discipline. But by this point in any season Lent, the Sunday of the Resurrection is certainly in sight, which is cause for some celebration, I think. The Church throughout the ages thought that the fourth Sunday of Lent was a time to give a bit of a rest to the penitential feel of the Sunday offering. We find subtle hints of that lightening of the mood today, especially if we consider the Scripture readings. In Joshua, we read about the Israelite's eating of the produce of the Land of Promise, the fulfillment of God's promise to his rescued people. In the New Testament, we read about two different ways to consider Christ's ministry of reconciliation.

I think each of our lessons presents us with a sense of what's happening on the God side of the penitential equation; perhaps gaining a deeper appreciation of God's perspective when we repent and turn towards His blessing and what can we expect when we look to His Son for our life rather than whatever mess we come up with. I am convinced that Jesus' parable we read this morning from the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's account of the Gospel is one of the most poignant visions of what God is like when we abandon our self-imposed exile and return to Him. Now, you might have noticed that the citation skips some of Luke 15. Today's parable is actually the end of the chapter, and there's two smaller parables that Jesus told his audience that kind of help set up this little story we often call the parable of the prodigal son. You might recall the parable of the lost sheep, or perhaps the parable of the lost coin. They are both right before today's lesson and they both pretty much express the same idea: that when lost things are found, it is natural to rejoice, and that's what happens in heaven when a sinner repents.

That's the most basic shape of today's parable but you'll notice some really interesting details in the little story that Jesus uses to teach us. As the parable begins, right off the bat we should kind of loathe the younger son. He comes right out and demands of his father that share of his property that will belong to him. And since so many of us have asked our parents for money at some point in our lives, we can miss that the obvious implication in that request is that the younger son is asking for the property that will belong to him *when his father dies*. Essentially, he has wished his father dead so he can just kind of go do whatever. Again, we are not supposed to be fans of this younger son thus far. But as Jesus continues to weave this tale, we understand that the dad goes for this plan and divides the property among the sons. We won't hear about the older son until later, but we should probably keep him in mind a bit.

But it's hard to keep the older one in mind while Jesus paints such a picture of what the younger son gets up to. He essentially spent his money on vice. He's wasted his inheritance. Later, we'll realize that the father has enough resources to have a household, livestock, and servants, so we can imagine that the dissolute living that Jesus describes was not just a *little* dissolute but a *lot* dissolute. We find that the fun is not to last for this guy as, Jesus continues, and the money ran out as a famine hit the country. The son ends up trying to work as a hired hand among the pig farmers around him. Now when Jesus' original listeners would have heard that detail, it might have been kind of like a record scratch in the story. I always imagine one of Jesus' audience saying something like, "Jesus did you just say *pigs*?" That's because pigs were not a favorite livestock choice among Jesus' people on account of the fact that pigs were ritually unclean. Theories vary as to why, but I've always thought it's probably because, even though they are apparently very sweet natured animals, they can be kind of gross. But as Jesus kept on with the parable, notice that this younger son couldn't even get some of the pigs' food for himself. Again, his audience would have been even more grossed out by this scenario.

Mercifully, this is rock bottom for the young son. Jesus tells us that he "comes to himself" and realizes that his father's servants are doing way better than he is. So, he resolves to grovel and confess. His plan is pathetic, to be honest and our loathing might start to turn to sympathy at this point. As he rehearses his apology, he says "treat me as one of your servants." He figures the best he can do in coming back to his father's house is to be received as a servant; he figures maybe he can get some food in his belly. And by this part of the story, I think Jesus has grabbed the sense of justice in his audience. They might even think, "shoot he doesn't even deserve that much." At least that's how I feel when I read this parable.

But then things go nuts. Instead of making his way to the doorstep ready to grovel, Jesus tells us that the younger son is met far off from the household by his father. And instead of being ready to lambaste his younger son for being so irresponsible, Jesus tells us that the dad is moved by compassion. The son probably had his apology speech on the tip of his tongue, but his dad is just too involved embracing him and kissing him upon his return. It's a move of absolute love and affection. It would be remarkable except so many parents back then and in the room right now know exactly what this sort of love looks like. As such, it is wonderfully profound and refreshing.

The younger son begins to say his apology speech but can’t even finish (did you notice that?), because at this point his father is too busy getting his son some noble robes and jewelry, already having the hands prepare a great feast to celebrate his return. There Jesus gives us an echo of those parables I mentioned a little bit ago. The father says: "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And Jesus tells us “They began to celebrate."

But what of the older son? Well, we find out that he has been faithful and loyal this whole time. As Jesus continues his parable, we find that the older son is pretty well annoyed at his father's extravagant welcome back party for the squandering other son. His father doesn't really even explain himself other than to double down on how great it is that the younger son returned and that is reason enough for the whole household to rejoice.

The parable is a masterwork. It’s powerful. In it we come to realize that the father in the story represents God's desire to run after us when we return, even if we have spent our days squandering His blessing. God's desire to reconcile with us is so profound that He sent his son to do it, even though it meant that Jesus would endure his cross and passion so that people could once again know and love God and celebrate the end of hostilities with him. The older son represents those whose faith has kept them close with God, whether that's in the case of Jesus' countrymen, or perhaps even like-minded or like-hearted people in any church community. But Jesus would have us understand that true repentance is met by true forgiveness, and that true repentance is actually a characteristic that should be present in both the sons of the parable.

Wherever you are in Lent, or in your overall life in Christ, I hope Jesus' parable this morning fills you with hope. There's no time like the present to lay aside those aspects of your life that keep you from the warm embrace and heavenly celebration of the Father. And even as we look to the sweet feast of Christ's own presence among us in the sacrament of the altar, I pray that in our repentance and in the joy that comes by nature of God's forgiveness, that we would be renewed for our work as ministers of the Gospel. As Paul wrote,

"So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

Once again, we are invited into God's plan for new creation, for reconciling to the world back to Him. Let us first turn back to Him and enjoy the love of a father who sought us first even as we were quite a way off from Him.

To Christ who is the shining light of God be all glory. Amen.