**Luke 15:1-3,11-32 March 27, 2022**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, Luke chapter 15 here re-reading these words. “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In Frank Sinatra’s hit song “That’s life” he sings, “That’s life, that’s what all the people say, you’re riding high in April, shot down in May…But I know I’m gonna change that tune, when I’m back on top, back on top in June.” That’s life. A highway of twists and turns, a rollercoaster of ups and downs. That’s life. That’s the life we see for the Prodigal Son in our Gospel lesson, one of the most well known parables of Jesus that we find here in Luke chapter 15. We see a life that is lived with the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. We see this man in a short period of time go from working son, to squandering big shot, to starving beggar and then forgiven son. But hey, that’s life. Good days, bad days, ups, downs, you just gotta ride the wave. You make mistakes, you make up for them, and you keep going. That’s life.

Or that’s one kind of life. For the Prodigal son life living with his father wasn’t enough. He wanted more. He wanted to get to the highest heights, so he demanded his inheritance. He insulted his Father but for a just cause. He wanted to be more than just a son. He wanted to live life to the fullest. Life for the prodigal son is a new adventure, the kind of life where you’re constantly searching for the new, and the better. If you remember the game show “Let’s make a deal” you would compete for different prizes, but there seemed to be a mystery option. You could have the money or the item you just won for wearing a particular costume or answering a question right, or you could have what’s behind the mystery curtain, or what’s in the mystery box. Sure you had a measly few hundred bucks, but what if there’s a car behind there? What if it’s a trip? Or new appliances? Or new furniture? It’s gotta be better right? Of course, it’s not always better. Sometimes it was garbage, or a donkey, or some other prank gift and the contestant would leave with nothing. For the Prodigal Son life was the constant struggle to have better and nothing else mattered. It didn’t matter if he insulted his Father or wished him to be dead so he could receive his inheritance. There was a better life out there, and he was going to live it. When the world chew him up and spat him out he was working with pigs and longing to eat what they were eating, there is no lower than that, but hey, that’s life, ups and downs. That’s just how some people live.

Compare it to the life of the older son. His life is one lived in the same place his whole life. Everyday waking up and working in the fields for his father. Life for him isn’t riding the wave of the highest of the highs and lowest of the lows, he stays in the same sort of place his entire life. He must have followed a typical routine. His work was honorable, He was obeying his father, he was going about his work and serving, but there was a complacency. We can’t put him on a pedestal because obviously with how he reacts later when he hears of his brother’s return he talks about his own work and how he deserves something for it. But hey, that’s life, or at least a picture of it. Rather than chasing after dreams you settle down, go about your work, you stay in the same place, doing the same thing, and you serve the Lord in the vocation he’s called you. This is honorable, but the second we sinful fallen children of God start doing something honorable, we immediately start patting ourselves on the back. But that’s life, that’s how it goes, it’s cliché. Why shouldn’t we think higher of ourselves than others who are in the rat race of life, we who are reliable and predictable and do the same things in our own little place in the huge wide crazy world. We’re better than them, and we should think of ourselves higher than them. We deserve more than them! Look at all of our work, look at all of their mistakes. That’s life. You earn your way in this world and you deserve more for doing good. That’s life. That’s what all the people say. But it’s not what God says.

There’s another comparison to be made though in this parable. We look at the ups and downs of the crazy life of the prodigal son and know of those who live that sort of life. It’s the life of those who seek to hit it big, who sell everything and move to California or New York with nothing more than a few bucks in their pocket. We know of the life of the older son who settles down doing the work of their fathers and stays in the same place he was born, working in the same sort of business until they die there. Both are pictures of life, but there’s 2 more that we skim through at the very start of this particular Gospel lesson. Think back on the first few verses of Luke chapter 15, the audience that Jesus is speaking to. You want a picture of life? Here it is. The sinners and tax collectors come to Jesus, drawing near to him to **hear him**. The Pharisees and scribes have come to see Jesus to **grumble.** That’s life my dear friends in Christ. The Pharisees and scribes aren’t there to hear and learn and grow, they are there to judge by their own standards and focus on everyone else rather than Jesus and rather than themselves. The first offense is to believe that Jesus has nothing to teach them, that they are coming to Christ not to learn but to critique and correct and to hear him say something that is heretical or wrong so they can kill him. The second offense is that they look at others who come to hear Jesus and think of themselves as better than they are, that their focus is solely on them and how they don’t deserve to hear Jesus, they don’t deserve to be forgiven, they don’t deserve eternal life like they do. But hey, that’s life, think in your own hearts and you’ll find it’s your own life. What is your response when someone you don’t know comes here to God’s house, where is your focus? On the readings? On the hymns? On the sermon? Or the Sacrament? Or on them….Who are they, what are they doing here? And what if it’s someone who has sinned against you? That you are feuding with or that you’re having a problem with? What are they doing here? How can they come here? They shouldn’t be here. I’m not going to talk to them, the words of Christ fill up the Sanctuary, hymns of praise and teaching, the liturgy that beautifully takes the Word of God and gives us an opportunity to return praise to God and speak of His grace and power and it’s all white noise, because our focus is elsewhere. Eyes that stare vacant toward a pulpit or altar with no recognition because your mind is on this person or that person, and not focused on Christ. But hey, that’s life. They do something bad to me, they don’t deserve forgiveness. They don’t come to Church, they should never come back. That’s life….

And we couldn’t be more wrong. You want to know what your life is? What my life is? Here it is. “The tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear Jesus.” That’s why we come here. We are the tax collectors, the sinners, the prodigals, the smug older sons, we are all of them wrapped up into one. We are all guilty, life isn’t lived just one way, we’ve all had similar experiences, we’ve all made mistakes, we’re all in need of forgiveness, but there’s one last picture of life, the life of the Father. Children rebel, that’s life. Children aren’t perfect, that’s life too, it doesn’t excuse bad behavior, it doesn’t mean that you don’t discipline your child, but the life of this Father is one of wanting, of looking, of longing to see his lost son again. This father has wealth, servants, and other members of his family. This father should be glad to be rid of a son who wished him to be dead. And yet we find him still searching for him, and upon seeing him, running! Running in robes that could very well trip him and hurt him, running at a time when no one ran because to run would look so silly having to grab your robes up and yet this Father runs! And doesn’t come up to the prodigal son and wait to hear his explanation, but he runs to him, embraces him, and kisses him. This father can’t wait to forgive him, the son’s words aren’t even given a response! The father goes to the work of restoring his son to where he was or even higher, his wrongs are forgiven. That’s not life, that’s not what all the people say, that’s not how it works, you have to earn back your place, you have to start from the bottom, you have to do it all, but that’s not what Jesus says, and that’s not your life. You are forgiven. You are given life by God and you squander that life, and you mess it up and you judge others by your own standards and believe that others are disqualified from forgiveness but the truth is, you by all rights should be disqualified from forgiveness yourself! That’s how life works in our sinful world, but that’s not how life works with God your heavenly Father. He looks for you, longs to forgive you, cares for you and restores you by sending His very own Son Jesus Christ to die for you, in your place, to take your sin upon himself and redeem you, buy you back from your debts to sin, death, and the power of the devil. And now you are restored, your future is bright because it leads to heaven, you are a child of God again.

That’s your life. That’s what happened for you. So keep the focus on Christ. When you’re riding high in April, give thanks to God. When you’re shot down in May, return to the Lord Your God. When you’re going about the work God has called you in the various vocations where he has placed you for the 40th year in a row, don’t think highly of yourself, don’t put yourself on a pedestal, keep the focus on God and what He has done for you. And when you see others, others who have sinned, who have strayed, who have messed up and returned, remember why you’re here. To listen to Jesus, to draw near and be forgiven, and welcome them back with open arms, because that’s how God welcomes you and loves you.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.