

“THE DUTY/DELIGHT COMBO: LIVING FOR GOD ALONE”

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2016

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (The Prodigal Son)

“There was a man who had two sons.”

At the beginning of our liturgy (at 8:30 and 11:00) each Sunday, the order of confession and forgiveness starts out with the invocation. Then I say, on behalf of us all, “God of all mercy and consolation, come to the help of your people, turning us from our sin **to live for you alone**.

Give us the power of your Holy Spirit that we may 1) confess our sin, 2) receive your forgiveness, and 3) grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.”

“*To live for you alone.*”

Let me use today’s Gospel reading to explain that phrase.

“There was a man who had two sons.”

They had two different lifestyles. Neither of them lived “for God alone.” The older son lived to be good, the younger son lived to be happy.

Jesus exaggerated their lifestyles a bit, for the sake of the story. In fact, those two sons represent twin impulses we can find in ourselves. I’m pretty sure most of us wouldn’t have come to church this morning if we didn’t have a good bit of the older son in us. And I’m certain that even though we might not go to his particular extremes, we all like to have a good time somehow.

I also suspect that you keep tabs on yourself. You know how good you are; and you know how happy you are.

It is not hard to know what it takes to be good. Ask anybody, they’ll tell you. And it is not that hard to know what it takes to be happy. Generally, you can just follow your heart’s desires. The real trick is how to be both good and happy. Because, being good sometimes means doing what you don’t want to do—which robs you of both freedom and happiness. And doing what you feel like can very take you in directions that are not good because they injure others or are downright unlawful.

How to be good *and* happy?

I’m not going to catalog all the possibilities, but let me suggest a few: Tell yourself that being good makes you happy. Tell yourself that making yourself happy is the highest good. Strike a balance between the two, settling for not being perfect and accepting some unhappiness as inevitable. Adopt an aphorism like “If you love what you do, you’ll never work a day in your life” and go with it. Etc.

I’m not going to recommend any of those alternatives. In my observation, they are all defective.

There is really only one solution to the problem of being good and being happy at the same time. The only and only solution was enunciated by St. Augustine centuries ago. He said “*Love God, and do whatever you will.*” Love God, and do what you want to do. That is the only lifestyle or way of life which unites our true duty with great delight. If we love the God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ, the God of mercy and compassion, then what we will like to do is going to become the same as what we ought to do!

If we love God, according to Luther, if we love God above all things; if we fear, love, and trust God above all things, we will totally obey all ten of the commandments. For in fact they are

nothing but elaborations of the implications of the single command to love the Lord our God with our whole heart and soul and mind.

“Loving God” is the “trick” which makes it possible to be good and happy at the same time, and forever. Because, when we do not love God our will is bent inward on ourselves, and this is what makes good and happy become opposites.

So, how can we be saved? What “teaches” us to love God?

The parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us that there are two sides to the remedy: grace and faith.

What ultimately saves the younger son is not anything he does, but the attitude and actions of his father. The generosity with which he is received when he returns home. The ring and the robe, and the fatted calf. [And I have no idea why the word is “fatted” instead of “fattened.”] The grace and mercy of the Father, the welcome he shows—they are what raise the younger son from the grave. “He was dead, and now he is alive; he was lost, and now he is found.” The younger son didn’t save himself.

But from the side of the son, it was indeed his repentance and faith by which he was saved. If he had not “come to himself,” if he had not thought to himself “how many of my father’s slaves have more than enough to eat, and here I am starving,” then he would not have been saved. If he had not actually put one foot in front of the other until he got all the way back to the homestead, he would not have been saved. His father would still be gracious, but he would not have been saved. On the side of the son, it was his “thinking again,” his repentance, and his faith, that is, his turning to the Father and not to another sort of savior, which saved him.

By grace he was saved, through faith.

On the other hand, and here is the deep and sad irony of the story, the good son who stayed home and never died or was lost, *was in fact not saved—by the end of the story*. We can hope, but nothing in the story says he eventually embraced his brother and joined the feast. Even though his father was pleading with him to come in and share the joy, he would not.

Grace could not save the one who would not repent and believe.

What do we find out, instead? We find out that he has been *acting* this whole time as though he was the obedient son who lived for the father, but actually he had been keeping score. “All these years I have been *working like a slave for you*,” he says, and his father should have slapped him right there. The older son, it turns out, was living not like a son but like a slave. By his own admission! Doing what he was supposed to do, but never free, and not quite happy. How sad.

You and I are here because we have found delight in our duty to God, thanks to the revelation in Jesus Christ that God is the welcoming father. Jesus told people who thought he was from God *not* to be afraid. At first, they were always afraid of his goodness and his might. But when he said “Do not be afraid,” they came closer—and so were saved.

Jesus has said to us, “Don’t be afraid to come to church and celebrate a feast of thanksgiving and sing to God and rejoice with all the other merry-makers who praise my name. It is a good thing.” And we are not afraid.

I stand up here at the altar, and you in your pews, and we lift our voices to the God who made heaven and earth, and even though we are not perfect we are not worried. We are just plain glad to be home, glad to be reminded what God is truly like.

And tomorrow, wherever we are, we will give thanks to God for the opportunity to be a part of his kingdom, serving him in whatever way we can with whatever gifts he has given us. We have seen Patee but we are back on the farm doing the Lord's work of love and mercy because here, serving God, living for God alone, is where we find the duty/delight combo in all its fullness. Thanks be to God. Amen.

