

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.”

You don't need to look at the scoreboard, when you hear Jump Around at Camp Randall, you know the fourth quarter is about to begin. You don't need to look at a bulletin or hymnal, when you hear, “Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world,” you know people are going to go forward for communion at a Lutheran Church service.

In the ancient world, they played a killing the fattened calf song that would be as recognizable as Jump Around before the fourth quarter or some songs we play in the liturgy such as the Agnus Dei. The only two times the fattened calf was killed was when the king came to town and the eldest son got married. Before the older son even asked the servant what was going on, he knew something was amiss.

They killed the fattened calf. The king isn't supposed to be visiting, and if I was getting married, I'd know about it! Can you imagine the outrage that the eldest son must have felt over his younger brother receiving the royal welcome after all that he did? **“But [the elder brother] was angry and refused to go in.”** Wouldn't you be angry, also?

We all know the lament, “It's not fair!” We've addressed these complaints with our kids when they were young when the brother gets something that the sister doesn't. We stew over times when we're passed up for a promotion. Perhaps we've fought with family when it was supposed that the inheritance wasn't split up fairly.

Likewise, if you're here in the pews, odds are that you're in the pews most Sundays, and you've been around the block a few times to know how things really work. The people who come here on Christmas and Easter only when there's nothing better to do—they're members just like you. They get the same Christian funeral that your faithful mom did even though she never missed a Sunday—even in a blizzard.

But the Father leaves the party to beg the elder son to join the party. What amazing love on behalf of the Father! And if we're honest, the son's response is not too different than a petulant child. We can summarize his complaints as, “I never do anything wrong, and you never give me anything, but you give my brother everything. It's not fair!”

But there's something deeper going on here. The elder son ironically acts like a hired servant. He shows his Father his resumé to prove that he is

worthy and that his brother isn't worthy. For him, what you do is more important than who you are.

The Pharisees and Scribes grumbled when Jesus let tax collectors and sinners draw near to Him. These were the very people who considered themselves the Sons of Abraham. Yet they, like the older brother, thought their place in the family was secured by what they did or didn't do for God. Paul teaches in Galatians 4:7, **“So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”** When the Jewish converts to Christianity still followed Judaism, they were servants, not sons.

The elder brother types in this congregation know that your place in the family is not based on what you do, but who you are. You are a son, not a servant. An heir, not an hourly hired hand. You are a beloved member of Christ's family. 3. The elder son thought he was a son but acted like a servant.

As we shift our focus to the younger prodigal son, we could call him many things: foolish, a disgrace, a failure—but for all his flaws, we can say one thing, only a son could have the courage and confidence to ask his Father, **“Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.”** The son knew what was his, and he asked for it.

The surprising thing for all of us is that the Father granted his portion of the inheritance to the son. In a backwards way, telling the Father, “To me, you're better off dead and I just want my inheritance,” was an admittance that even if I can't make use of you while you're alive, you're still my Father from whom I will receive every good and perfect gift.

But the prodigal son soon found what was really valuable in life. When you try to have the Father's inheritance without the Father's presence, you end up lost in a far country, squandering the property in reckless living. Before long, the famine sets in, and hunger arises as he took the good gifts of his father and poured it down the drain.

So it is that there are many prodigal sons. Yes, there are those we know that have ruined their lives stuck at the bottom of an addiction: alcohol, drugs, gambling, or sex. Perhaps some of us have that homeless brother or nephew or niece who you don't even know how to help.

Yet how many people are there who would identify as Christians who want the Father's inheritance without the Father's presence? They maybe aren't in tents in the alley, but are millionaire bankers who know Jesus is Lord but really are hoping in the next stock split? How many doctors have a

casual connection to a church but are really waiting for the next promotion? How many blue collar workers know they're going to heaven because Jesus paid for their sins, but He sure doesn't pay their mortgage, so in between long hours, the light at the end of the tunnel is the PTO coming up next month?

Maybe for those prodigals, it doesn't take hitting rock bottom and longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, but a friend to sit alongside them and tell them that as the Psalmist writes in Psalm 84:10, **“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”** God's riches are greater than Wall Street's. The peace of Christ is greater than any PTO. The little humble community at the local congregation is something deeper than a bridge club. It's not about earning salvation, but there is an unmistakable fact that when we aim to get just enough Jesus to get to heaven, we're the ones who are missing out, being cheated, and missing the many comforts and peace that our Lord has to offer.

This realization slowly dawns on the younger son. He'd rather have the Father than just His riches. He too sees it better to be a doorkeeper in the Father's house than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. He decides to return, and is content to be simply a servant, not a son. It would be enough for him just to be in the Father's care, even if it was as a hourly worker.

And yet we find that those who want the Father's presence without His inheritance end up getting both. Generations have marveled at the crazy love of the Father. We read, **“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”** Men in those days didn't run. They would have had to hike up their robes and show their yucky hairy legs to those around them. Yet the Father shuns all propriety and runs to embrace the son, just in case the younger son changed his mind before he got to the door.

Indeed, the son gets the royal treatment. He gets the best robe, the ring with the family crest, and shoes on his feet. The best cow is killed and a feast is prepared. The Father rejoices that the son has come back to life! 2. The younger son thought he was a servant but acted like a son.

All throughout this parable, we see the love of the Father who gives away His inheritance. He runs to greet the prodigal son. He even humbles himself to reach out to the proud elder son.

Your Heavenly Father has shown you immeasurable love by sending His own Son Jesus to die in your place. He has sacrificed His Son to pay for

your sins, your reckless living. Whether you consider yourself a saint or a sinner, Jesus died for you. He rose again proving that there is life after death, and we will dwell in the courts of the Lord's House forever.

The Father has showered upon you love that you are adopted as sons and daughters of the king. The king has come to visit, and it is befitting to slaughter the fattened calf. You not only receive His inheritance, but you receive Him. He doesn't want your money. He doesn't want your time. He doesn't want your volunteerism. He wants you, and if those other things follow as a result, all the better. 1. The Father showers love on His sons.

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER WANTS SONS TO LOVE, NOT SERVANTS TO SERVE HIM.

Today, Hagan and Roric are about to confirm their faith that was first delivered to them at their baptisms. Hours spent studying God's Word and the Small Catechism has led up to this point. I visited your house and I grilled both of you on your knowledge of the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Confession and Absolution, and the Lord's Supper, and you answered splendidly. Martin Luther considers familiarity with these six chief parts to be a prerequisite for admittance to the Lord's Table.

Today as you speak back before the congregation the promises and confession made on your behalf by your parents and sponsors, you will receive Holy Communion for the first time. Know that not only is your biological family proud of you and loves you, not only does your church family celebrate with you, but Your Heavenly Father loves you and smiles upon you on this special day. He is the one who welcomes you into the heavenly gates on account of Jesus Christ, who become your brother and your savior in the waters of baptism. Know that no matter the twists and turns life takes you, the Father waits for you with open arms welcoming you back.

Today, all of us rejoice that our Heavenly Father welcomes us, both prodigals and eldest sons, into the party, the share in His joy. Amen!