

Lost and Found Luke 15:1-32

Next to the parable of the good Samaritan, the parable of the prodigal son is probably the most well-known and beloved of Jesus' stories. Our Presbyterian founding father John Calvin called it "the gospel within the gospel." All of the good news of the gospel of Jesus is contained in this story.

We are reading all three parables and the little incident that provoked the parables, which you heard along with the first two parables, because they are strung together purposefully, but I will focus mainly on what we call the parable of the prodigal son (which is really not the parable of the prodigal son, but the parable of the gracious and extravagant father).

Let's listen to a familiar story, and try to enter into it...

Luke 15: 11-32

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to

my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

This is the Word of the Lord!

Two main reflections: **first**, a reminder that one of the purposes of parables is to find ourselves in them. When Jesus tells his stories we are invited to relate to a situation or to a character in the story and learn from it. That’s one

of the main reasons that Jesus told stories so often. To draw us in, teach us about *ourselves*; to invite us to look into a mirror—to learn greater truths about ourselves (along with learning more about the world, and about God). Kind of like looking at a good work of art. It tells a part of our story, and interprets our life to us and we find ourselves in the art, if we're open and willing.

So, as we hear this story, we ask ourselves: Am I the prodigal? The older sibling? The gracious and compassionate parent? Sometimes we move from one to the other throughout our life, or at different times in our lives. So where are you, today?

John Newton, the slave trader-become-preacher who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, found himself in this story—he was the prodigal who squandered his inheritance in wild living. As he said, toward the end of his life, “It was not I who found my heavenly father, but my heavenly father who found me.” And so he penned the great line from the hymn, “I once was lost, but now am found.”

Yet, while we are invited to find ourselves in here, we are to find God in this story too. This story is profoundly about God, and who God is; it reveals God's heart. In fact, Jesus begins the story by saying, “A man had two sons...” He didn't say, “A younger son left home.” That's why this parable isn't really the parable of the prodigal son, but the story of the gracious and extravagant father. Who

actually had *two* lost sons. Because they were both lost; just in different ways. And the father seeks out both of them—with compassion, Jesus says. As we heard last week, the Greek word compassion is “splagna” and it means “intestines,” or “guts.” God is moved in his guts! (if God has guts; Jesus, as God, certainly did)

The parable tells us that it is God’s nature to seek the lost, and then throw a party. And that latter act—of throwing a party—is really the focus of and the reason for these 3 parables; it’s one of the common threads in all three stories. God and the angels rejoice when the lost are found. This is Jesus’ way of saying that he isn’t going to grumble at “those sinners” the way the Pharisees expected him to. He welcomes them.

So, these stories reveal God’s heart of compassion and grace, and... the invitation to us is to find ourselves in the story. Again, where do you find yourself in here, today? That’s the first reflection for us.

Second, it’s important to notice who Jesus is telling these parables to. He doesn’t tell these stories out of the clear blue sky: “Hey everybody, listen up! I have some good stories to tell you...” The audience here is the Pharisees and their minions (scribes). Jesus is defending his ministry against their complaints that he wasn’t fulfilling the messianic job description that was handed to him by

them. So they grumble that he's hanging out with "sinners and tax collectors" (people of ill repute!) and then he tells these stories. I love how Eugene Peterson translates the introduction to the parables: "Their grumbling triggered this story." And then off he goes—and tells 3 stories!

Again, here, we make the observation that in all of the gospels, when the Pharisees describe those outside of the religious fold, they call them "sinners," or refer to them according to the cultural label assigned to them: tax collector, prostitute, gentile, leper, beggar, and so forth. When *Jesus* talks about them, he calls them "lost" or "sheep without a shepherd." It's a compassionate approach. Jesus never labels anyone. In fact, when Jesus speaks directly to these people he often calls them "friend" or he calls them by name. He addresses them personally.

So here are two very different ways of looking at people, and therefore two different ways of relating to them. Jesus sees people as lost, and that which is lost needs to be found, right? This approach and attitude is encapsulated in Jesus' personal mission statement—Luke 19:10: "*the son of man came to seek and to save the lost.*" He says this after spending an entire evening with Zaccheus—who the Pharisees labeled "a sinner." But remember that when Jesus

first met him—up in the tree—he called him by his name; he said, “Zaccheus, come down; I’m coming to your house today…” He made friends with him!

In all of this, Jesus is trying to communicate to the Pharisees that God (he/Jesus) is always on the move, always searching, always taking steps toward people. Not waiting for them to get their act together first.

And so, to get his point across, he tells three parables in a row—two short attention-grabbers, and then one longer parable to bring the lesson home in a deeper way.

In telling these 3 stories to this audience (to the Pharisees) Jesus surprises and perhaps even shocks them with his descriptions of what God is like. Let’s think of how these stories would have been heard in their cultural context, by the Pharisees.

First, God is like a shepherd—I guess that’s okay, but shepherds were not held in high esteem in the first century; they were considered low class and mentally ill, because they couldn’t get a real job, they smelled bad, they were loners & nomads. But this particular shepherd in the story leaves 99 sheep by themselves, vulnerable to predators, in the wilderness, to go look for one that went astray? That’s a bad decision. You cut your losses and move on, lest you

lose more sheep by pursuing just one. So, Jesus is comparing God to a low-class sheep herder who, it seems, isn't thinking very practically.

Second, Jesus compares God to a *woman* (!), who lights a lamp to look for a lost coin. That would have been not only shocking, but even offensive to his hearers—to tell a story to patriarchal middle eastern religious *men* in which the God figure is a woman. God is like a woman who loses a coin, then lights a lamp and searches for it. Then throws a party when she finds it.

Third, God is like a father—okay, that's a better image—but a father who gives his son his share of the estate when he demands it. Once again, this is unthinkable in that culture. It would be like a son saying to his father, "Old man, you're not dying fast enough for me, so give me my share of the inheritance *now*." In that culture, if a son does this sort of thing, the father's duty is to beat him without mercy. But what does this father do? He gives him his share and lets him go. That's surprising.

Then this son hits rock bottom when he takes a job feeding pigs, considered the lowest of the animals—and that adds to the drama of the story because it makes the son as unclean as he can be; he's at the bottom of the pit of humanity. He is not only feeding pigs; he's eating what they're eating!

The son then comes to his senses and prepares a speech for his father and high tails it back home, hoping he might be welcomed back as a servant.

At this point in the story the Pharisees are probably thinking, okay, this father let his son go with his share of the inheritance, *now* the father will beat him without mercy when he comes home.

Jesus continues the story, and what does the father do? When the father sees his son from afar, he *runs* to greet him with joy and open arms, which is undignified for a man in that culture because in running he would've had to gather the folds of his robe (gird his loins), thus exposing his legs, which was a shameful act in that culture at that time. And still is today in some parts of the world.

I have a friend named Leo Walsh who is a Catholic priest and did part of his seminary training in Egypt, studying the Coptic church. While he was there a Coptic priest was fired for walking down the street too fast! His gait caused the hem of his robe to be kicked up, exposing his ankles and lower legs. So, he disgraced himself. That's a similar kind of culture that Jesus is speaking to. For the father to run would have been disgraceful.

And a further surprise is that honor is shown to the youngest son upon his return. Usually, honor is bestowed upon the responsible first-born sons who stay

home. But the youngest son gets the best robe (probably the father's festival garment), a ring (likely a family heirloom), and a party with the finest things.

And the responsible older son is out in the field and he's furious about the whole thing.

The Pharisees, certainly, by now, have found themselves in the story as the older son, and I'm sure they relate to his anger and frustration at his father's generosity toward the younger brother.

What has Jesus done here by telling this string of stories? Especially to this audience? Jesus has taken their understanding of how things ought to be, who God ought to be, who they ought to be, and has completely messed it up. He has turned their world upside down and inside out.

Now, I don't think Jesus is **trying** to offend the Pharisees. He certainly hasn't made them happy with his illustrations of who God is and how God works, but I don't think he's trying on purpose to see how offensive he can be.

What Jesus is trying to do is show them who God really is. Jesus wants them to see a huge God of grace, amazing grace. There is grace for the prodigal children who get what they *need*, rather than what they *deserve*.

But the wonderful aspect of this story is that there is grace for the older brother as well. The father leaves the party to seek and find him too, out in the field, because he is also lost—it's just not as easy to identify his lostness because he's lost in his over functioning sense of responsibility, and he's lost in his pride. And in a tender moment the father reminds him of the grace that's been his all his life. "My son (that's a tender greeting), you are always with me, and all I have is yours." Wow. What a beautiful affirmation! Talk about generosity! And then he's invited to the party.

So, here are three parables, about lost animals, objects, and persons, and about a God whose nature it is to seek and find the lost, and then throw a party when the lost are found.

Let me try to pull this all together for us with one last observation that we can take home for personal reflection:

The brilliance of this third parable, and what distinguishes it from the first two, is that it's an unfinished story. It's an unfinished story.

We don't know if the younger son remained home and lived gratefully and responsibly in the auspices of his father's heart of goodness and grace. Likewise, we don't know if the older brother overcame his pride and self-pity and joined the

party after the father went out to him and assured him. The story just ends, without resolution. I don't know about you, but I'd like to know what each of these sons did next. But Jesus doesn't say, and it remains an unfinished story. And, because of that, it ends with an invitation.

By telling the story this way, Jesus is saying to us, "Now *you* finish the story." "What are *you* going to do now?"

If you're the prodigal: what will you do with the grace you've received and experienced, now that you've been forgiven and celebrated and welcomed home?

If you're the older sibling: can you celebrate the fact that you have a father God who has a generous and compassionate heart toward the people you may think don't deserve it, and can you see and give thanks for what you already have, and will continue to have? That you live in abundance!

And for all of us: can we become like this extravagant God, who, out of a heart of compassion and in a spirit of welcome, is willing to embrace all of God's children, and spare no expense in welcoming them to God's party of grace?

How will you and I finish the story?