

March 14, 2001 The Prodigal Son Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Prodigal: Wastefully or recklessly extravagant

Parable: A short allegorical story that conveys a religious truth; an earthly story with a heavenly meaning

The message of all three parables in this section is for the “Pharisees and scribes” who were “grumbling and saying ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

The message of The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and the Prodigal (or Lost) Son is: God cares about the lost, about sinners, about outsiders, about people who are simply not like us.

But, that isn't much of a sermon, so let's dig into this parable and see what God has for us today.

- 1) The younger son wants his inheritance right now. This would be one third of what the father owns right now. The older son's share is two thirds. This is like saying, “Father, I wish you were dead.”
- 2) The father's response is to liquidate one third of his property and give the cash to his younger son. The father and older son are now one third poorer than they had been. A number of us in this congregation took a bad hit when Wall Street crashed. Maybe some of us lost a third of our pension. How did that feel? Would you ever lose that amount willingly? What sort of situation would that be?

- 3) The younger son leaves a few days later. He goes to a far country and lives it up. “Dissolute living” is what the NRSV calls it. He squandered his inheritance doing things he should not have been doing. He wasn’t investing unwisely. He was throwing his money away hedonistically. His one goal was pleasure. Nothing else mattered. It was during this period that he became prodigal.

- 4) He runs out of money at the same time a famine overcomes this far country. Even though he was willing to work, and probably had some experience doing work on his father’s farm, he couldn’t find a job. Eventually, when he was desperate and starving, he found work feeding pigs.

Please understand how horrible, how awful, how profoundly humiliating this job would be for a Jewish boy. It would be something of a chore for any one of us to feed pigs, but for a Jew it was much, much worse. Pigs were unclean. Jews weren’t supposed to have anything to do with them. They couldn’t eat them, they couldn’t touch them. A Jew today playing football with a real “pigskin” would be unclean.

So, this young man was in a situation that was unthinkable to everybody he knew growing up. In addition, he was kept so hungry that the slop the pigs were eating was starting to look mighty tempting.

- 5) So, “he came to himself.” Consider what this means. He wasn’t a bad boy. He wasn’t without some fine and redeeming qualities. He had just been ignoring them as he lived the high life far from home. But, as he was looking longingly at the slop, he came to himself. He woke up. He found his right mind. He remembered who he was. And he got up, walked out of that pigsty, and headed home. That must have been an incredibly long walk from that far country to his home. He had nothing, and would have to have lived off the fat of a land in famine, or on the kindness of people along the road, which is dicey at best.
- 6) He doesn’t expect to be welcomed back as a son. His behavior was unforgivable and no father in his right mind would welcome this son back, at all. But, he was hoping his father would allow him to live on the farm as a hired hand. This means that when he came to himself, he fully understood the outrageously selfish nature of what he had done. It was not only very stupid, it was very hurtful to his father, which didn’t matter to him before.
- 7) “But, while he was still far off his father saw him and was filled with compassion.” It seems like the old man had been looking for him, peering down that road every day, praying that his prodigal, thoughtless, self-absorbed, lost son would come home. He still loved his son. He missed him. He wanted him to come home and resume his life as the younger son. There is no anger in his heart, no malice, no need to punish the boy. I’ve been told that this is no model for good parenting. But, it’s not about you and me. This father is God.

God is always calling all of us, all people, all of creation home to be with him, to live in the light of his steadfast and eternal love. He will not be discouraged by our behavior. He will not be dissuaded from loving us infinitely and aggressively. God welcomes the lost child with open arms every time. Consider the actions of the younger son: he told his dad to drop dead, ran as fast as he could as far as he could, wasted all his inheritance that represented years and years of hard work by his father. Everything his father stood for, the younger son spat on with great vigor and enthusiasm. But none of that mattered at all to his father. His father loved him unconditionally, just the way God loves every one of his children, every human being that ever lived. Like the father in the parable, he doesn't make exceptions. He loves the lost just as much as he loves the ones at home. More on that in a minute.

- 8) The father runs out to greet his lost son. This would have been a shocking and amusing picture for Jesus' original listeners. The old man hiked up his robes and ran to the road. Wealthy Jewish men simply did not run, period. But, this man didn't care about conventions and expectations. His son, whom he loved with all his heart, had come home. For all he knew, his son was dead in that far country with famine. So, he ran. He also stopped his son before he could finish his apology. It didn't matter. He gave him all the symbols of his position as son of the master, and threw him a big party.
- 9) But, not everyone was thrilled about the lost son's return. The older son, the good son, the faithful son, was returning from the field. He heard the party, and asked a worker what was going on.

When he found out it was for his brother, he was furious. He seethed with righteous indignation. This was not right. That brother of his was dead to him, and good riddance. Now, he's back. What if he pulls the same stunt again? Would the father give him a third of what was left over? Would his own inheritance feel the bite of his brother's selfishness?

He is in the middle of all this rage when his father comes out from the party to get him to come in and celebrate his brother's return. He is not convinced. He is probably yelling at his father about how hard he has worked for him, how good and faithful he has been, how he never even got a goat to share with his friends at a party, while the fatted calf was killed for his younger brother.

The father loves this son just as much as the other one. And he wants both his sons to love each other, the way he loves them. The parable ends with him trying to coax the good son into the party, to celebrate his newly found and living younger brother.

So, while this parable, as well as the ones that preceded it about the lost sheep and the lost coin, is about how much God loves the lost ones, it is also about how much **we** should love the lost ones. Because, sometimes **we are** the lost ones. Aren't we? Or are we always the good son? Have we always been the good son? It really doesn't matter, as far as the parable goes. Love is the norm. Love is what is expected of everyone, because love is the example set by the father. Love is the example set by our Father. He wants to help us follow that example.