

“Jesus . . . on God’s Love (2011)”

Luke 15:1-32 ¹

The story of the Prodigal Son that Joe and I read earlier fills the last half of Luke 15, but let’s go back to the beginning of the chapter, where we’re told that *“Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such despicable people—even eating with them!”*

Jesus persistently ignored the accepted standards of behavior when it came to the kinds of people with whom He associated. Jesus was always and forever spending His time “on the wrong side of the tracks.” From first to last, Jesus seemed determined to associate with “sinners,” and, because Jesus was always in the news, it galled the community leaders to no end that He spent His time with those they considered to be riffraff while having little time for them. The three stories or parables that we find in Luke 15 are Jesus’ answer to this complaint.

While these three stories are probably familiar to you, our task this morning is to let them speak their wonder to us once again. As we’ll see, one of these stories is about an independent businessman who happened to be a shepherd, one is about a housewife, and one is about a gentleman farmer who had an impertinent and rebellious son.

There are three different kinds of lostness in these three stories. The sheep becomes lost through sheer foolishness. The coin becomes lost through no action or fault of its own; and the son becomes lost through his own deliberate action. Each of these kinds of lostness continues to visit human lives today; but in each parable, the emphasis falls not on the matter of lostness itself but on the joy of reunion, and the sharing of that joy.

In the first story, Jesus said, *“If you had one hundred sheep, and one of them strayed away and was lost in the wilderness, wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine others to go and search for the lost one until you found it? And then you would joyfully carry it home on your shoulders. When you arrived, you would call together your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you because your lost sheep was found. In the same way, heaven will be happier over one lost sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away.”* Can you feel the jab Jesus gave to the Pharisees with that story?

We’re told that sheep are notoriously stupid. They don’t really intend to get lost, but they don’t pay very much attention to things, and they frequently “just nibble themselves lost.” The point of this story is that it is God’s very nature to seek and to find the lost. Jesus called Himself “the Good Shepherd” (John 10:10), and other New Testament writers called Him “The Great Shepherd” (Hebrews 13:20), “The Chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4), and “The Shepherd of Souls” (1 Peter 2:25).

Calvary’s cross would demonstrate there was—and is—no price too great for God to bring us Home. As the old gospel song, “The Ninety and Nine,” puts it, “None of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed; nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through ere he found his sheep that was lost.”

My friend, you are that sheep, as am I. I frequently tell persons whose journeys have taken them into the wilderness, whether through their own foolishness, through no fault of their own, or through their own rebellion, “I don’t know when it will happen, and I don’t know how it will happen, but I know that it will happen, that if you don’t give up, the Shepherd will find you and bring you home.”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on February 13, 2011.

In the light of this first parable, we might paraphrase John 3:16 something like this: “For God so loved each of you who has become lost in the wilderness of life that He sent His only and beloved Son into the wilderness to bring you Home. God did not send His Son to condemn you, but to save you!” (John 3:16-17).

Now although women were sometimes shepherds, shepherding was mostly a male occupation. Jesus’ second story spoke more directly to a woman’s experience: “*Or suppose a woman has ten valuable silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and look in every corner of the house and sweep every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her because she found her lost coin. In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels—that would be God’s joy!—when even one sinner repents.*”

The mark of a married woman in those days was a headdress made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. This circle of coins was the equivalent of our wedding ring. The earthen houses of the day had dirt floors and few windows, and the floors were generally covered with straw, so finding a lost coin would have greatly resembled “finding a needle in a haystack.”

At some point during my youth, our family was touring the Blue Ridge Parkway and stopped at one of the overlooks. When we got back into the car, my mother exclaimed with dismay that the diamond had fallen out of her engagement ring. Because we tend to look often at things that we treasure, she was pretty sure that the stone had been in place when she got out of the car, so we searched the area where we’d just walked . . . and one of us found the stone! In a jeweler’s eyes, that diamond might or might not have had great value, but in my mother’s eyes, it was beyond all price. Though she tried to be brave, I remember well the concern on her face until we found the stone. Such is God’s love for you!

We’ll understand Jesus’ point in these stories more fully if we remember that the Pharisees did not believe that “*there will be joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.*” To the contrary, they believed that “there will be joy in heaven over even one sinner who is obliterated before God!” And you and I do well to bear in mind that we, too, may sometimes find ourselves desiring things that wound God’s heart while casting aspersions on things that—and people who—are closest to God’s love.

Before we move on to the third story, there’s another point we need to see in the second one. One character in each story represents God the Father and illustrates God’s love for His children. In the first story God is represented by the shepherd. In the third story God is represented by the father of the prodigal. But in the second story, God is represented by the woman. That in itself was a radical and revolutionary idea, and Jesus’ listeners could not have missed His point.

God is obviously beyond the limitations of human gender. Still, if God were to become human, a choice had to be made. In a world that was decidedly patriarchal, embodiment as a man and using images of a father’s love clearly made the most sense and created the least stumbling block to Jesus’ message. But here and there—and this is one of those places—the Bible quietly and firmly reminds us that God’s image resides equally in us all.

Well, the third story, that Joe and I read earlier, is usually called “the Parable of the Prodigal Son.” This is Jesus’ longest and best-known parable, and these twenty-two verses have been called “the greatest short story in the world.” It would be more accurate, though, to call this “the Parable of the Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother,” because it’s really a story about two ways of receiving those who have been lost.

You know the story. A wealthy farmer had two sons. The younger son came to his father and asked to receive his inheritance immediately, rather than at his father’s death. Such a

request may have been even more impertinent in that day than it would be in our own, but the father still granted it.

As you may know, a Jewish father was not free to divide his property in any way he pleased. According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the oldest son was to receive twice as much inheritance as any other son (women didn't usually inherit property in those days), so in this case, the younger son would have received a third of his father's estate.

I don't know that we have to assume that the young man was a rascal when he first left home. He may have been demonstrating the kind of initiative and spunk that we value in Western culture, however strange it may have seemed to those at home. But, while the young man may have intended to become successful in worthy ways, the truth was that he was no wiser than Pinocchio, and whether or not he had mischief in mind when he left, mischief soon found him, and Jesus said that "*he squandered his wealth in wild living*" (Luke 15:13).

His father had divided up the "living," but that did not provide the son with life. Wisdom cannot be imposed on a child, even by a father's love. And the younger son insisted on learning the hard way that you can't "find yourself" just by leaving home, nor can success be bought at the world's markets.

As the months passed, the father waited for news of his son in that peculiar agony of hope and fear known only to parents. When that which is lost is a person, the person cannot be found until he or she wishes to be found.

After the young man had wasted his money, famine struck the land, and he found himself a penniless alien far from home. With jobs for foreigners nearly non-existent, the young man agreed to become a pig keeper, the very last job a Jew would accept. He was lonely, starving, and completely degraded.

The beautiful part of the story is that the young man finally came to himself. His pain was creative, and a moment of truth finally arrived. He saw what his own choices had done and he took responsibility for his sin against both God and his father. He decided to return humbly to his father simply as a hungry man asking for a job.

Now the kind of homecoming a prodigal can expect depends on the kind of parent one returns home to, and it was the memory of his father's love that turned the young man's steps toward home. "*So he returned home to his father,*" Jesus said. "*And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming.*"

This is my very favorite part of my very favorite story. How was it that the father saw his son while he was still a long way off? It was because day after day, month after month, and maybe year after year, the father had been watching for his son. His heart had been running out to the horizon and back, time after time, hoping to see the form of a man in the distance. Day after day his eyes had fooled him, but this time, he was sure!

It was considered undignified in those days for an old man to run, but he ran anyway! Before the first word of dejected explanation could be spoken, the father threw his arms around his son's neck and kissed him. The son began his little memorized speech, but his father cut him short. He wasn't interested in speeches or in humiliation. The father put the best robe on his son, the sign of the honored guest; he placed a signet ring on his finger, the sign of authority; he put shoes on his feet, a luxury known only to free men; he killed the fattened calf, a sign of extravagant hospitality; and jubilation was set loose throughout the whole household!

Each of these parables is fundamentally about God's love, and this third parable shows not only the kind of repentance to which God responds, but also the way in which God responds

to it. Here we get just a glimpse of God's deep desire to forgive us. God is eagerly waiting to embrace us, His wandering children . . . and we're afraid of what He will do if we return!

At first glance, though, the pardon seems to be too easy. Does God really say to us, after we've ruined our own lives and poisoned the lives of others, "Oh, just forget it?" No, that's not what the story says.

If we look closely, judgment is written throughout this story. The degradation of the pig sty, the desperate awakening, the journey homeward in rags and hunger and poverty, and the broken and stammering "I have sinned," constituted no easy pardon. The marks of the far country remained on the son's heart all his life; but though the marks remained, the father's love transformed them from symbols of degradation into signs of redeeming love.

Was the pardon too easy? If you and I want to know the full measure of our forgiveness, we must fix our eyes on a splintered cross that stinks of hatred and of dried blood and of death. Our pardon has been bought with a price—a terrible price. We have been cured, yes; but in the economy of God's Love, the Physician has born the full cost of our healing Himself.

And what had the elder brother been doing during the prodigal's absence? He had been living by the rules, doing what was expected—dutifully, conscientiously . . . and joylessly. When the older brother heard the music and the dancing and learned their meaning, he bristled and angrily protested the party by refusing to join it. And the thing that really offended him was that they were feasting in honor of a sinner.

When the father went out to plead with his older son to join the celebration, his son's furious retort was, "*All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!*" (Luke 15:29-30).

With the phrase "*this son of yours,*" the older son both blamed his father for having such a worthless son and distanced himself from any relationship with his brother—just as the Pharisees were doing in that very moment with the people they themselves regarded as worthless. The Pharisees could not possibly have missed the point that they were the older brother in this story; but with that point was also the fact that the father went out to the pouting older brother just as he had done to the younger one. The father clearly loved them both very much, and while Jesus was accusing the Pharisees on the one hand, He was inviting them to the party on the other.

As we've noted, this parable is really about the father. The father had two sons who were lost to him, and he grieved over both losses. And Jesus made it very clear that this father represents God, who loves and yearns for the recovery of both "sinners" AND scribes, both publicans AND Pharisees.

But God's love can only be offered; love cannot be imposed. The father had waited because his son had to choose to return; and as soon as that choice was made, the father ran to him. And is not Jesus Himself God's running to us? The Bible says that "*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8).

At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, Great Britain's Derek Redmond responded to the starting gun for the 400-meter race knowing that his lifelong goal of the Gold Medal was only seconds away. But as he entered the backstretch, Redmond was sent sprawling into the cinder track by the burning agony of a ripped hamstring. By an act of sheer will, he struggled to his feet through the excruciating pain and began hopping toward the finish line.

Suddenly, a man bounded out of the stands, pushed past the security guards, and threw his arms around his son. The crowd wept and cheered as they watched the father half-carrying his wounded son as they stumbled down the stretch and across the finish line.

So how is it with you today? Do you find yourself wounded in the “far country” of the heart and spirit? Are you yearning for forgiveness and for your Father’s love? If so, I’m very happy to tell you that your Father is watching and waiting for you to turn your heart toward Home.

And as the old gospel song puts it, “If you’ll take one step toward the Master, my friend, you’ll find his arms open wide.” Far more than Derek Redmond’s father ran to him, your Father will run to you with the words, “Come on, my child, let’s finish this *together*.”

