

“The Best Story of All”

Luke 15:11-32 ¹

As we make our way through the New Testament, we come today to the Gospel of Luke. As I was pondering what text to choose from Luke, I decided to look for texts that are unique to Luke, and in that process I was soon reminded that the entirety of chapter 15 is unique to Luke.

Luke 15 contains the famous parables of The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost Son, and since the story we usually call “The Prodigal Son” is my favorite story in the Bible, I decided to look up how recently I’d preached on that. I was surprised to discover that before today, I’ve only used The Prodigal Son as my text six times in more than fifty years of preaching.²

While our focus is going to be on the third, longest, and most famous parable, we need to consider all three briefly as we begin. And in order to understand what was going on in this conversation, we need to start at 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. 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.

The third parable, usually called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” is Jesus’ longest and best-known parable, and these twenty-two verses have often 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.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on 5.3.20, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

² Next week—May 7, to be precise—is the 40th anniversary of my ordination, but I had preached a few times prior to my first pastorate, which began in June, 1980. My very first public sermon was in 1968, my senior year in high school.

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 complete 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 keeper of pigs, the very last job a Jew would accept, and he found himself jealous of the awful stuff the pigs were eating.

What was usually fed to pigs in those days was carob husks, and there is a Jewish proverb that says "when the Israelites stand in need of carob beans, then they return to God." Perhaps it was so with this young man.

In any event, he was lonely and starving, and the first 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,³ 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 a glimpse of God's deep *desire* to forgive us, and what it *means* for God to forgive us.

God is eagerly waiting to embrace us, His wandering children, and the Good News of God's Love is that when we make decisions that mess up our lives, as we all do, and do repeatedly, our Heavenly Father sends an ambulance, not a firing squad.

At first glance, though, such 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, at all.

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 surely remained on the son's heart all his life; but though the scars 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 at 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.⁴

³ People in first-century Palestine did not regularly eat meat, and slaves didn't wear sandals. It is from this reality that the Black spiritual sings "all of God's chillun got shoes."

⁴ This parable is at heart a picture of the two ways of receiving sinners. The parable is chiefly about the Father. This father had two sons who were lost to him. God is like the Father, who grieves over the loss of both sons. The younger son recovered. He was mixed up about life, but at least he found it precisely

The story ends with an invitation to join in the merriment of the feast. We are not told that the older brother accepted the invitation. Perhaps he continued to stand outside the house, glowering and resentful because of the happiness within. God does not reject either of his two sons—neither the sinner because of his waywardness nor the Pharisee because of his self-righteousness. There is a place at God’s banquet table for both—if there is repentance—but no one can really say “Father,” who is not ready to say, “Brother” (1 John 4:19).

Well, I’m going to change gears and invite you to look at this with me from another direction. C. Roy Angell, a popular preacher of another generation, suggested that if the Pharisees and the scribes had been more forgiving, Jesus could have made this story even more beautiful. Here’s how that might have gone

One day the older son came in and asked his father and mother to sit down with him in the living room, because he had something important to discuss with them. When they were all seated he said, “Mom, I heard you sobbing late last night. I know you’re miserable because my younger brother is way out yonder somewhere, and we don’t know where he is.

“The other night I came in late and I noticed a light in my brother’s room. I drove the spurs into my horse as I turned into the gate, and I flew up to his room, because I thought he was home. I was just going to hug him and tell him I was so glad he was back, because life has been terrible around here without him. I sat down on his bed and cried for half an hour. Mom, how long have you been keeping a light burning in his room?”

Then he turned to his father, “Dad, I saw you the other day. You and I don’t talk about him much, but I saw you when you climbed up that highest hill out there where you could see way down the road. You sat up there all afternoon. You were watching for him. I plowed on, but the tears plowed furrows down the dust on my cheeks.

“Now let’s face it. We’re miserable. All of us are. Let me go find him. I can find him. I can find him and bring him home.”

But his mother said, “No, no, no, you can’t go. We’ve lost one boy, and we can’t possibly take the chance of losing you.”

His dad reached over and said, “Son, you’re a noble boy, but we can’t let you go.”

And then the young man got up and walked around, “Look, it’s just like a funeral around here all the time. I miss him just as much as you do. I put on a laugh and a brave front and I joke some, but I’m dying inside. I’ve got to go find my brother.”

The next morning he started out. His father and mother walked with him a long way and watched him as long as they could see him.

Time passed, and one afternoon that father, sitting on the same hill, saw not one, but two

where he had lost it. God is like the seeking Father, the waiting father, the father who cannot contain his joy when the prodigal returns home. In this story, the prodigal son represents the publicans and sinners whom Jesus received and with whom he ate.

Like so many good, religious people, the Pharisees were hard, judgmental, and unforgiving. It is more than passing strange that God is more merciful in His judgments than many of the pillars of His church. God’s love is far broader and more forgiving than humans who refuse to forgive. Those who fail to see their own need of God’s grace (because of their own self-righteousness) have none to give to others. See also Matthew 20:1-16.

young men coming up that dusty road, and he couldn't get there fast enough. He called to the servants as he ran past the house, "Bring a robe! Bring some sandals! Bring a ring!" And he ran to his youngest son first and smothered his repentant talk against his shoulder.

After a bit, he turned with quiet respect to his older son, reached out and took him by the shoulders, and whispered, "All that I have is yours, forever and ever. You're the grandest son I ever knew."

But the older son pushed him off gently and said, "No, Dad, I told my brother that if he would come home, we would just forget about that other division of the property and we would be the same two brothers we always were."

Then the old man said to the servants, "Go, kill not just one of those fatted calves, but kill two of them. Call the neighbors together. The seat of honor at the table belongs to the older son tonight. He's the hero of this occasion."

And Dr. Angell continued, "I think that's the way Jesus would have liked to have told that story if He hadn't needed to give the religious leaders of His time a rebuke. No, if Jesus had not had to give the religious leaders *of all time* a rebuke, He might have told it that way. You and I haven't done much better than they did. We haven't gone into that far country and found those who have gone astray and brought them back—not half often enough."

And then Dr. Angell asked three questions. The first question was, "**Where is that far country?**" He continued, "The best answer that I have ever seen was the one that Dr. Ellis Fuller gave: 'It is anywhere that a person tries to live without God.'"

"I used to think of the far country in the words of Kipling, 'where the trails run out and stop.' I used to think it was some wild Western frontier town where the dust was deep in the streets, where there was no paint on the houses, where outlaws lived, and where men killed each other for nothing.

"I used to think it was this town in nowhere that was filled with the scum of the earth, where saloons and bawdy houses were the only hangouts men had; but alas, I realize that a person can be in a far country in the house that is next to mine, where the church bells peel out every Sunday. The far country is, just as Dr. Fuller said, anywhere, anywhere that a person tries to live without God.

Time gets away, so I'm just going to state Dr. Angell's second question, which was "**Why do people go into that far country.**" I want to conclude this morning with his third question: "**Is there any way to get back from the far country?**" And then I want to tell a story from another famous preacher, Dr. George Buttrick:

"God had three sons. Two of them were sons of earth, children of God's creation; and the other was a Son in heaven, begotten of God's Everlastingness. The younger son on earth forgot his true home, and through pride sank into sin and shame. The older son on earth began to despise his brother, and so his prideful spirit grew hard and cold.

"The Son in heaven lived always in His Father's joy, but a shadow fell on both whenever they thought of the sons on earth. Suddenly a flash of resolve moved them both at the same time. The Father said, 'I will send the Son of my Everlastingness to seek them'; and the Son said, 'I will go, that my brothers may come home and my Father will no longer grieve.'"

“So that Son took flesh, and walked the roads of earth. He found the younger prodigal, ate his husks, and shared his shame; but the prodigal was deaf to Him. ‘You are no brother of mine,’ he cried, ‘and I don’t even believe in God!’

“After that, the Son of God’s Everlastingness found the older prodigal, who was actually in church; but he, too, was hard of heart: ‘Why should you seek my brother?’ He asked bitterly, ‘for he is a wastrel, and you are no better than he!’

“Then befell the most cruel thing earth has ever known: the two prodigals killed the Son of God’s Everlastingness, because His Light brought pain to their eyes – eyes that loved the darkness better than the Light. In the hate that persistent love arouses in those who reject it, they nailed Him to a cross. But He prayed for them as He died.

“After that cruel death, the younger prodigal said, ‘I think I would return to God if I had not killed God’s only begotten Son, but now I cannot.’ The older prodigal said: ‘I never knew how loveless I was until I saw His love, but I have killed Him, so now I have no hope.’

“And then . . . and THEN . . . the Son of God’s Everlastingness rose from the dead, for a grave could not imprison His great love, and both prodigals discovered that He was with them after all.

“What they did then, who can say? You and I must finish the Story”

And so, with this Story ringing in our ears and resonating in our hearts, we come to the Table of the Lord

~~~~~

Well, we’ve spent the morning with my favorite story in the Bible, and some of you may have noticed that the story is rather similar to my favorite verse in the Bible:

*The LORD your God is with you.  
He is mighty to save.  
He will take great delight in you.  
He will quiet you with His love.  
He will rejoice over you with singing!*  
- Zephaniah 3:17

And both this Story and this Verse convey the same Invitation:

Softly and Tenderly Jesus is calling,  
Calling for you and for me.  
See, on the portals He’s waiting and watching,  
Watching for you and for me.

Come home . . . come Home.  
You who are weary, come Home!  
Earnestly, Tenderly, Jesus is calling.  
Calling, “O sinner, come Home!”