

3rd April 2022

Lost & Found

Bible reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The parable of the lost son is one of three parables that Jesus tells in Luke chapter 15—the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Each parable has a similar plot. Something is lost, something is found, and then there is a party.

In the first parable a fairly well-to-do shepherd loses one sheep. We know he is wealthy because he owns 100 sheep. Typically, a family might own 15 to 20 sheep but this man owns a hundred. Presumably he could afford to lose one sheep, but he leaves the 99 and goes to find the one. And when he finds her, he throws a party.

The second parable is about a poor woman who has 10 coins and loses one. We know she is poor because the coin is actually called a drachma, a small silver coin that would purchase just enough food to feed a family for one day. These 10 coins represent her life savings. Since most people lived hand to mouth, you have to wonder how hard she had scrimped and saved to accumulate such a meagre nest egg. To lose one coin would be disastrous, and so she turned the house upside down, and shown a light into every dark corner until she found it. When she finds it, she throws a party with all her friends.

The third parable is about a father who has had a falling out with one of his two sons. But this time instead of going and searching for the lost son, the father waits anxiously at home for the son to return. But when he does return, the father throws a lavish party. Someone is lost, someone is found, and then there is a party.

Often, I take my readings and themes from the Lectionary, which is a resource many churches from different denominations follow to jointly celebrate special times of the year. I don't always follow the exact timing, and sometimes adjust the scripture readings. However, this was the set readings for the 4th Sunday of Lent, and today is the 5th Sunday of Lent.

While Luke 15 has three yoked stories here of lost and found the lectionary skips over the first two. Most experts on Luke agree that Jesus' triplet of stories here should really be read as a unit. Jeffrey Weima, A Professor of New Testament at Calvin Seminary, notes, all three stories end the same way: with rejoicing (and in Luke's gospel, "rejoicing" is always related, and understood for salvation).

The foil of all that jubilation is the sour-puss Pharisees whose abiding muttering indicates their ongoing disdain for Jesus.

v1-3 *"By this time a lot of men and women of questionable reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered these stories". (Message)*

In Jesus' stories here, we go from a lost sheep who was of some value, to a lost silver coin that was of significant monetary value, to a lost son who, though once valued as a son, makes himself into a very grotesque and undesirable character. He'd be easy to write off. In fact, most people would write him off. Certainly, the Pharisees would.

Jesus was welcoming the very folks whom the religious establishment had written off. Even worse, he was at the table with them, which was an intimate act of fellowship that implied a kind of personal bond and connection. So, we're told the Pharisees muttered into their beards about this. Jesus overheard their comments and knew their hearts and so told them these three stories that reveal the heart of God.

And that's really what is going on in Luke 15: we're not here first of all being given stories of then, "*go and do likewise*" variety. The parable in verses 11-32 is not in Scripture first of all to encourage fathers to be forgiving of their naughty kids any more than the first two stories were an instruction to shepherds, or a cautionary tale to take better care of your money. No, all three reveal the heart of God—a heart that is broken clean in two by lostness, but a heart that sings with a joy as wide as the cosmos when even the silliest sheep, or the meanest of sons comes back and/or is found again.

As a Lenten text, Luke 15 reminds us that for all its sombre tones and focus on Jesus' grim sacrifice and suffering, Lent is also a season of joy for God. Every confessed sin, every ash-smudged forehead, every singing of the old hymn lyric, "*Were you their when they crucified my Lord*"? Sounds in God's ears like joy. Because each such sentiment is being prayed, uttered, and sung by people who "once were lost" but, "now are found"!

The phrase "Lenten Joy" may sound like an oxymoron (like "jumbo shrimp" or "deafening silence"). But it's not. As the writer to the Hebrews said, Jesus endured the hell of the cross and all his sufferings, not because he was tough, or merely bowing to the will of his Father. No, he endured it all, "*for the joy that was set before him.*" Hebrews 12:2

Jesus begins this third parable with the younger son asking his father for an advance on his inheritance. In Jesus' shame-honour culture, asking a living parent for an early inheritance is rude. N. T. Wright explains that "*asking for his share before the father's death; it was the equivalent of saying 'I wish you were dead'*". Children who make such a request lose their respect and honour, and their community ostracizes them. The parent's response to their children's request is usually a wave of great anger. Often parents and children cut all ties with each other because of such an insulting request.

Contrary to all expectations, the loving father agrees to divide the property between his two sons. I believe that Jesus' audience was shocked by the father's and his younger son's actions. No one should do such a thing. It takes the younger son a few days to gather everything he inherited and travel to a foreign country. It seems he wants to cut all family ties.

The younger son "*squanders his wealth in wild living*", v13 and when famine hits the country, he becomes hungry and hires himself out to one of the citizens to feed pigs. The younger son shames his father by reducing his status from a son of a large landowner to an unclean man feeding pigs. He becomes miserable. The young man "*came to his senses*", v17 which means that he eventually repented. He, as Joel B. Green states, "*recognizes his loss of status, and the deteriorating social condition that developed from his series of actions.*"

Returning home as a failure, a person is not well received in shame-honour cultures. In Jesus' culture, one would travel to a different country to work hard and succeed. If one returns home unsuccessful, he/she embarrasses their family.

In this culture, the word "fail" connotes shame and embarrassment. However, the younger son returns to his father. He accepts the consequences of his actions. "*But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him*" v20. Wright rightly explains that, "*in a culture where senior figures are far too dignified to run anywhere, this man takes to his heels as soon as he sees his young son dragging himself home.*" I do not remember ever seeing my late father running. It is very unusual for senior women and men to run.

The loving father is thrilled to see his son. He ignores his cultural norms and runs to welcome, embrace, and kiss his son before the son can apologize. After the son's apology, the loving

father orders his servants to clothe his son with the best robe, put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet v23. The love of the father covers the filthy son with honour and love. He also orders his servants to prepare a fatted calf to celebrate his son, who *“was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate”* v24. The father’s order is not accepted in a shame-honour culture because they do not celebrate an unsuccessful person. The love of the father goes against all his cultural expectations.

Jesus talks about the elder son who is angry because his father killed the fatted calf, which is kept for important events such as weddings, to celebrate his younger son. He refuses to attend the celebration, distancing himself from his family.

His father leaves the party to plead with him, but the elder son argues with him and describes himself as a slave to his father. The father responds with kindness by assuring his son, *“you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found”*. v31-32.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Like the lost sheep and lost coin parables, Jesus tells the parable of the love of a father to respond to the Pharisees and the scribes who grumble about Jesus’ mingling with sinners and tax collectors and eating with them (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus uses the three parables to respond to his critics who focused on the sins of the tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus demonstrates that God cares about the sinners and rejoices when they repent. Jesus eating and partying with the sinners symbolizes the feast and joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7, 10). These sinners welcomed and responded to the gospel. Jesus’ critics act like the elder son who refuses to rejoice with God over the repentant sinners. God begs them to join the celebration like the father in the parable.

Jesus tells us through these three parables that God’s grace and love reaches out to the sinners and outcasts, and God also does not leave out the Pharisees and the scribes. Jesus deliberately has an open-ended story. He wants his hearers to fit themselves into the story and act out the ending. The church needs to act out the ending of the story, as well. Is the church willing to welcome the sinners who respond to Christ’s message? Or does the church refuse to join the party and celebrate with the repentant sinners?

Brothers and sisters even though we may not feel lost, if we have no relationship with god, we are. To be found, we need to realize that God is looking for us Luke 19:10 *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* We need to admit that we are separated from Him. By giving up our waywardness, we can be reunited with Him and restored to His family.

Conclusion

Number Two Son asks Dad for a handout, skips town, squanders his inheritance, and decides to come home only when he runs out of options.

Number One Son never shirks his responsibilities and does everything his father asks of him, but he resents his father’s gifts being showered upon his younger brother.

Which son needs to repent? Both.

Which one deserves to feast on the fatted calf? Neither.

And yet, both are invited to join in the celebration. That’s grace.

Will you today surrender to Jesus, repenting of your pride and receive Him as your saviour? I tell you, there is rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who repents! Amen.