

Sermon

Full to the Brim — Prodigal Grace

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 27, 2022

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:3 So he told them this parable: 4 “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

Luke 15:8 “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

Luke 15:11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took

place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' 20 So he set off and went to his father. 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. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father; 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 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.'"

- I. We should note right here at the start today**
 - A. This parable is the last in a series about lost things.**
 - B. In chapter fifteen he tells a series of parables which focus on God's during grace.**
 - 1. So as you think about this familiar story with me — ponder how generous and gracious the Father is about everything that happens.**
 - 2. He is a generous person**
 - 3. He has compassion for *both* of his children.**

- II. Today's Scripture lesson from Luke is about the Lost & found.**
 - A. Parables are meant to provoke in us a wonderment about being lost, and found, and coming home again.**

- III. An Ignatian praying of this passage:**
 - A. Considering it from each vantage point**
 - B. Imagining what it was like to hear it from them all.**

- IV. So, I want to take the main players one at a time:**
 - A. Shepherd/Woman — Looking for what has been lost.**
 - B. The sheep/coin — The object of God's Searching**
 - C. The Scribes & Pharisees — whose need to judge & feel superior keep them from entering into the joy of Heaven.**
 - D. The "sinners" — who can be glad that God is already searching for them, and who in turn, can begin to seek God.**

- V. Looking for what is lost**

- A. We all know this experience**
 - 1. Keys, phone, some important paper...**
 - 2. It can be irritating to lose keys**
It can be devastating to lose something or someone precious to us.
- B. In the context of faith - I am left to wonder about us:**
Do we even have the sense that we have lost something precious?
 - 1. Ours is not a world radiant with the love of Christ. It is very easy for us, children of the Light, to simply “go along” with the many settled assumptions of our fallen world and accept them as if they were an accurate reflection of the Gospel of our Lord.**
 - 2. Do we even realize how often our words and our actions grow not from a living relationship with God, but from our many other allegiances and obligations?**

VI. But what if we are the sheep/coin — the *objects* of God’s seeking?

- A. A coin can hardly participate in its discovery.**
- B. A lone sheep’s instinct is to lie down and hide quietly for fear of predators.**
- C. We are left to wonder about Jesus’ choice of these two objects.**
 - 1. Are we meant to conclude that our being found, our salvation, is not in any way our own accomplishment?**

VII. Let's look for a moment at the two sons

- A. Presumably they are both pursuing the good life — though they seek in in different ways.
- B. The way the parable is told leaves us convinced that *both of the Father's children are lost* . . .
 - 1. Indeed, the older brother who, by the standards we normally use to judge people, is doing the right things by staying home and working hard, is still standing outside the celebration at story's end.
- C. We are meant to wonder, you and I, about these two boys and the ways in which we pursue similar notions of the good life.

VIII. The older boy seems to think that he can *work* his way to the good life — to a life worth having.

- A. He follows the rules
- B. He puts in long hours
- C. He practices delayed gratification to a fault

BUT

- D. He is also:
 - 1. Sullen
 - 2. Resentful
 - 3. has a well-developed sense of personal injury
 - 4. Is self-righteous and self-justifying
 - 5. And lashes out in accusatory anger both at his brother and at the Father. You remember . . . *he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out*

and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

E. He may be geographically at home . . .

- 1. But his spirit is a long way removed from the spirit of the Father**
- 2. His form of disloyalty to the Father's will is apparently even more stiff-necked and harmful than the younger boy's precisely because he *thinks* he is virtuous when he is anything but!**
- 3. In the older son's world he is *always* the victim of someone else's mistreatment:**
 - a. Young son's request of inheritance**
 - b. Father's reception and celebration of the younger boy's return.**

X. The younger Son attempts to *spend* his way to the good life.

A. He takes family resources which, by the normal rules of inheritance should not yet belong to him and he:

traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

B. His rejection of his family and the rules of his Father's house are obviously egregious.

- 1. Asking for his inheritance while the father still lives is tantamount to asking the Father to die**

- or at the very least seems to suggest he wishes the father was out of his way.

2. He appears to be a slow-learner because it is only after he has burned through the entirety of his half of the family wealth that “comes to himself” and turns back home.

C. His

1. Callous indifference to the implications of taking his inheritance early,
2. folly in squandering that inheritance
3. his cruelty in leaving the family farm solely as the responsibility of his sibling

D. These all make clear just how lost he is

XI. Before we look at the Father’s responses to these two...

A. Let us simply take a moment and admit to ourselves that we have both of the boys in us to some degree!

1. Using “retail therapy” when we should know that the high we feel when we purchase something *will not last*
 - a. We cannot *spend* our way to the good life!
2. Adopting a self-righteous way and imagining ourselves as somehow better than others
 - a. nursing grudges and resentments
 - b. We cannot *work* our way to the good life!

B. Perhaps each of us will favor one son more than the other . . . but for this parable to do its work in us

requires that we identify and “own” the aspects of the sons that belong to us too.

XII. Jesus has been urging us to repent of the attitudes and habits which get in the way of faithful discipleship.

A. We see in this story how God responds when we “come to ourselves” and return to the Father.

So he set off and went to his father. 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. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

B. See how gentle and gracious and compassionate the Father is!

- 1. No rubbing the son’s nose in the mess he made**
- 2. No bargaining with him about the future**
- 3. No reference to his sketchy past**

C. Filled with compassion the Father runs to embrace and restore

D. When the older boy makes his complaints....

the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

- 1. There is compassion and generosity toward the older son too!**

XIII. In a world which teaches us two dreadful lies:

- A. That we can spend our way to happiness**
- B. That we can *earn* our way to joy**
- C. We have this provocative story which offers a counter-narrative:**

We cannot buy ourselves to a meaningful life, and we cannot work ourselves to a meaningful life. But we *can* receive from the hand of the Father the gift of knowing who we are and where we belong. The Father invites both sons (and you and me too!) into a world ordered by prodigal *grace* in which there is always hope for our redemption:

- † **Even if we have squandered much through a rejection of God and our exploration of “dissolute living.”**
- † **Even if we are trapped in an enslavement of our own design — following the rules, but for all the wrong reasons.**

There is good news because as we will say shortly in our declaration of Faith:

*In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
... Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.*