

Proclaiming the Kingdom: Parables of Luke

A Biblical Study

How Far Will God Go To Recover the Lost?

Sharing the joy at the return of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a prodigal son (Luke 15:1-32)

We most often hear the parables of Jesus as stand-alone, independent stories read during the liturgy of the Word in Sunday worship. Consequently, we usually don't hear the wider literary context in which a particular parable is placed in the teaching of Jesus or in the reporting of that teaching by a gospel-writer. This liturgical practice occasionally masks some of the rich possibilities for interpreting a parable that might otherwise surface when we look a parable's placement in a wider sequence of text.

To illustrate this point, let's consider the well-known parable of the prodigal son. At various times in our own lives, we have no doubt closely identified ourselves with one of the two brothers. Many of us have interpreted some aspect of our lives through the lens of the wayward son, who squanders his assets before coming to his senses, repenting and returning home. At other times, we have sympathized with the plight of the older son, who is bitter because his enduring faithfulness to his father seems to be unappreciated and overshadowed by his father's celebration at the unexpected return of the unworthy brother.

But how often do we enter and reflect on this parable by aligning ourselves with the father figure, who is usually understood to be God in most allegorical interpretations of the story?

Our typical identification with one or both of the two brothers in the story is not surprising. Following the Episcopal lectionary calendar, we hear this beloved parable, unique to the Gospel of Luke, on the Fourth Sunday of Lent in Year C. And we hear it detached from its placement by Luke as the capstone in a sequence of three related parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The three parables all focus on seeking out and finding what is lost, and then sharing the joy of returning what has been lost to its rightful place.

In other words, the wider literary horizon of the so-called parable of the prodigal son suggests that Jesus and Luke intended for us to identify the *father* as the main character in the story. The setting and context of today's three parables, when read together, definitely point us toward that conclusion.

So, today, let's not be unduly influenced to focus primarily on the wayward son because of the title usually given to this third parable. Instead, let's consider how these

three stories, read together, might inform and direct our lives and relationships in new ways.

Luke 15:1-32 Recovering the Lost

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."

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.

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."

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.

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.’”

Searching for and joyfully celebrating the return of what has been lost

Setting. In the two opening verses, the Jewish leaders grumble and complain that Jesus welcomes into his community the outcasts of Jewish society – the tax collectors and sinners. These marginalized Jews not only eat with Jesus, but draw near to hear him teach. To respond to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus tells three related parables that help to define the character of God and the mission of Jesus: searching for sinners who are lost, finding them, and joyfully celebrating with the community the return to their rightful place among God’s people. Read together, all three stories stand as a direct rebuke to the leaders who complain about Jesus’ welcome given to those who are lost.

As is frequently the case in Luke, a story about a man – here, the shepherd – is set side by side with a story involving a woman – here, the woman who’s lost her coin. Luke regularly juxtaposes a story about a woman with a story about a man, subtly elevating the role of women to that of men in their ancient patriarchal society.

The first parable of the lost sheep is also set against the backdrop of Israel’s history, where the image of the shepherd characterizes a leader of God’s people. In the writings of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 34, this imagery is especially poignant for understanding today’s first parable. Ezekiel rails against the shepherds of Israel who are not adequately caring for God’s people. Instead of feeding the sheep, healing the sick ones, bringing back those who have strayed,

and seeking the sheep that are lost, Ezekiel chastises the shepherds for simply ruling over the sheep with force and harshness. Without a faithful shepherd, the sheep are wandering over all the mountains and hills, scattered over the face of all the earth, with no one to seek or search for them. Through the voice of Ezekiel, God promises to search for God's lost sheep, to seek them out, rescue them from the dangers that surround them, return them to the fold, and care for them as the shepherds of the flock *should* be doing. Luke's use of the parable indicates that God is now carrying out this divine promise through the mission of Jesus, who has been sent to seek out, find, and restore to God's people those who are lost.

Characters. The main character in each parable is the person who has experienced loss: the shepherd, the woman householder, and the father. By searching for what is lost, and rejoicing with friends and family when it is found, they help to define the character of God and the mission of Jesus in the world. Luke invites us, as the audience, to show a similar concern for searching out the lost, returning them to their community, and celebrating at their return.

In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd's actions mirrors the mission of Jesus, sent into the world by God to seek out the lost, to find them, and to return them to their place among God's people. The woman householder in the second parable also reflects an image of God and God's Messiah, Jesus. Just as she searches for the valuable coin that is lost, they, too search diligently for valuable people who are lost. In both parables there is a great celebration with friends and neighbors when the lost sheep and the lost coin are found and returned to their rightful place.

Neither the lost sheep nor the lost coin seems a fitting image for repentant sinners, since neither character does anything in each story. They are simply found by the one searching. From the perspective of Jesus and Luke, however, a sinner's repentance is mostly about the experience of being found by God rather than being the product of human effort. In both cases, reflecting God's joy at finding a lost sinner, the community celebrates over the gift of new life for the one who is found.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father suffers the loss of each son in a different way. He gives his younger son a share of the estate and risks losing both his possessions and his son. Similarly, he allows the older son to stay on his property with bitter alienation, risking another kind of loss associated with their relationship. In both cases, however, the father goes out to seek and return the son who is lost.

Plot. The plots in the first two parables reflect the clear pattern of searching/finding/rejoicing. Even though the third parable also reflects this same pattern, it is more complex and adds a few other thematic wrinkles. First, notice that the father does not rebuke the younger son for his selfishness or carelessness. Instead, following the pattern we have identified in earlier studies, the father simply sees the suffering of his younger son who is returning home and he has gut-wrenching compassion for the son who has been lost. The NRSV translation used above simply says the father “was filled with compassion” for his son. But Luke uses the same verb we have previously characterized as “having gut-wrenching compassion” for one who is suffering. The father is so moved with compassion that he runs out to meet and welcome his younger son, before he reaches home and tries to express his sorrow and repentance. God is this eager to receive back those who have wandered away from the life-giving, divine-human relationship.

The father demonstrates the same care and concern for the older son, coming out of the house to meet him and to try to comfort him in his suffering. Like the Pharisees and scribes who refuse to rejoice at the return of the outcasts and sinners, however, the older brother refuses to re-enter the father’s house to celebrate his wayward brother’s return. He resents the ease with which the unworthy outcast is now welcomed back by his compassionate father.

For Reflection

Today’s first parable of the lost sheep directly challenges every member of the Christian community. We sometimes wrongly think that it is only the responsibility of the priest or leader of the congregation to seek out those who are lost and restore them to the fold. As disciples of Jesus, however, each of us has committed to continue carrying out his ministry in our own world. Can you tell a recent story about how you or another member of your congregation sought out someone who was lost or alienated from the community of faith? Can you identify someone in your life that is alienated from the Christian community? What action might you take to help restore this person to their place in the community?

In each of the three parables, there is a great celebration among friends and neighbors over the return of what had been lost but has now been found. We can easily understand the shepherd’s celebration with others at finding a lost sheep, or the woman’s joyful gathering of her friends and neighbors to give thanks for the valuable coin now back in her possession. Reflect on the situation and response of the older son in the third parable. What blocks him from

participating in the celebration? What is the cost to him of joining the celebration? What attitudes or beliefs make it more difficult for us to celebrate when a repentant sinner returns to the community after straying from the path of faithfulness? Identify some of the benefits to the repentant sinner and/or to your community that might be gained from such a celebration.

Put yourself in the place of the father in the third parable. Have you ever experienced gut-wrenching compassion for the suffering of someone close to you? How did you respond? Have you ever experienced gut-wrenching compassion for someone close to you whose own actions were responsible for their suffering? How did you respond? What makes the two situations different? What does the parable suggest about our responses?

Why does the father celebrate the return of his younger son? What is the cost to him of celebrating that return? How might the father's example reshape some of your actions in the future?