

REJOICE, WHAT WAS LOST IS FOUND

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Lent 4

The parable of the Prodigal Son is the third in a series of three parables in Luke 15. Our reading begins with the introduction of Jesus addressing a group of Jewish leaders, then jumps over the parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin to the longer parable of the Prodigal Son.

All three have one thing in common and that is that somebody rejoices in each parable that what was lost is now found, a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. The focus of the celebration in each of these is that the one who had lost something rejoices that they have found it, whatever it is. Store that in the back of your mind for about 5 minutes.

Like many parables this is one of extremes, some of which we miss because of the cultural differences between the world of 1st century Jews in Palestine and our world.

Inheritance: The son, by asking for his inheritance in effect says, Dad, you're already dead to me. I am walking away, I am not going to care for you in your old age. The son by this action has basically cut himself off from the family unit. This is a grievous sin as it violates the commandment to honor your father and mother and would be considered an unforgivable action in that time.

A distant land: The son goes to a distant land which means he has gone outside of the borders of Israel. He has left the land of the chosen. He has gone to live with those who are not among the chosen, therefore he is living with those who are unclean and not under God's protection.

He hits bottom: After spending his father's money, he is reduced to work that no Jew would do. He is out with the swine. Jews were not even allowed to touch a pig then or now. Yet he is jealous of the swine who at least have corn cobs to eat. It is when he realizes that he has fallen so low that he finally comes to his senses and decides to return.

Father's greeting: The father does not patiently await his return, but as soon as he sees him, he runs to greet his son. No self-respecting man of any stature would run for much of anything. Yet we have a visual image of this man, in long robes running down the road with everything flapping in the breeze if you will. The greeting is extravagant well beyond anything a 1st century Jew would consider. This response is probably more shocking to them than it is to us!

Hultgren in his commentary suggests that we should title this not the Prodigal Son but the Parable of the Father's Love. For the entire point of this is to show the love of God for us.

However, this really is not a parable about love, but is a parable of Grace. This not about this world but how the kingdom will work. Of course this seems a stretch for us to understand. Grace is something that is beyond our understanding because of human nature. Our catechism defines Grace as follows:

Q. What is grace?

A. Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.

Many focus on the unearned and undeserved part of this yet take a look at the second half. Look at what grace does. Here is an important teaching for us in this parable. It is the love of the father that allows the son to return to the family even though he certainly doesn't deserve by his actions to be treated with anything other than disdain.

Henry Nouwen in his remarkable book on this parable takes the position that we have all played or will play all of the roles at sometime in our lives. When considering this parable from a standpoint of grace, many of us find ourselves in the role of the older son. Our problem understanding the Grace in this parable comes in the form of the angry response of the older son. We find ourselves thinking or being told: I suppose that to do X is the right thing to do even though I would rather do Y. Many of us in our hearts may feel that the older son has a legitimate point. That dynamic is at the heart of the challenge that the concept of Grace provides. However God does what is so hard for us to do. By acting as the father in this parable God restores the relationship of the family, of the father and his children. He seeks to restore all of the family, all of his family to wholeness. What we are left to ponder is does he gain the one, while the other then turns away?

There is another element to this story that merits some attention as well. I was listening to another of the Tuesday evening sermons from the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge. Br. David Vryhof was preaching on the word conversion and two paragraphs jumped out as being applicable to this parable.

When the younger son returns he has the opportunity to complete a conversion experience that begins in the pigsty. Br. David speaks of two types of conversion and the first, personal conversion is what truly applies here. In looking at or experiencing a conversion:

"The individual, spiritual and personal transformation comes when we turn from thinking ourselves to be unloved to knowing ourselves to be deeply loved and valued by God. It is a movement from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from death to life. We come to know ourselves as the beloved children of God, and discover the greatest freedom and the deepest security we have ever known.

Conversion leads us to *a new identity and a new way of living.*

As conversion takes hold, we discover that we are beloved children of God – created by God and for God, loved and cherished by God more than we can begin to imagine, secure in the knowledge we will never be abandoned or forsaken."

Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We may chose not to accept that love, but nothing can stop the love God has for each and everyone of us. Recognizing this then changes where we fit in this parable. For no longer do we see ourselves as the older brother, but realize that in the great cosmic scheme we are all in reality by nature of our humanity, the younger son. That if we truly look inside ourselves we will know that what we truly want is return to God and to be astounded when we see God the Father running to us with open arms; open arms that no earthly father can extend.

God's greatest desire is that we desire God. So God the Father rejoices when, after wandering away, we return and desire to once again know God, to be held by God, to allow ourselves no matter how unlovable we may feel, to be loved by God.