

Luke 15:1-32

Today's three parables represent Jesus' response to the Pharisees and scribes, who were grumbling amongst themselves about Jesus eating, repeatedly, *with those people*; "tax collectors and sinners." In the Jewish scriptures, when Jews "grumbled," it was an indication of their faithless opposition to the often startling ways God chose to provide for their most fundamental needs.

Then as now, sharing a meal is a sign of inclusion and hospitality. It creates a bond among those who eat together. However, some prefer not to bond with those who are, in their view, less than desirable. Concerns about who one eats with matter in the Jewish tradition. And tax collectors were not just "law breakers," but collaborators with the colonizing power of the day.

Luke recounts the three parables Jesus told, all of which are built around the tremendous relief and exhilarating joy experienced when that which has been lost is restored. Parables begin with the world we know and end in a world that is even now dawning upon us with metaphorical power. The parables start with life as lived: a shepherd loses one of a flock of sheep; a woman loses one of her ten coins or drachmas. What is described is the absolute commitment of the person to *finding again what was lost*.

Action verbs predominate the parables. The shepherd, and not the sheep takes action: leave, go after, find, lay it on his shoulders, rejoice, come home, and call together his friends. The same holds for the woman: light a lamp, sweep the

house, search carefully, find, and call together her friends. The parallels here show the emphasis is on the *finding* and the one committed to find the otherwise hapless lost sheep and passive lost coin.

Both the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin exploit the common human experience of losing and finding – the sense of apprehensive anxiety over that which has been lost and the contrasting sense of relief when it is found. As the shepherd searched for the lost sheep, the rest of the flock was abandoned, unattended, out “in the wilderness,” an exceedingly precarious and dangerous place for sheep to be left to fend for themselves. Not only is the wilderness a harsh and hostile environment, the wilderness is that part of creation most visibly under the control of the devil.

Luke asserts that God is more pleased over one transgressor who mends his or her ways than over ninety-nine pious persons who have never transgressed. That may sound like “bad theology” until we remember that the narrative context has Jesus telling these stories to critical Pharisees and scribes who know how serious are the transgressions of “tax collectors and sinners,” and by association, Jesus himself.

Like many who enjoy the benefits of privilege, the Pharisees and scribes very likely see themselves as the ninety-nine who smugly and arrogantly think that they are already righteous, and thereby have chosen to remain by themselves, vulnerable in the wilderness, without even imagining, much less taking part in the restoration celebration or sharing a meal with Jesus and the rag-tag group he eats with. The

intensity with which God seeks the lost has been the burden of Luke's entire narrative, and is being prophetically enacted even as Jesus determinedly travels toward the Jerusalem cross.

The Pharisees' and scribes' complaint that cheats and rogues receive welcome at Jesus' table sound very much like the complaints of the elder son about the extravagant celebration for the family scoundrel in the third parable. Along with the elder son, they are caught up in zero-sum thinking; they fail to recognize that in God's reign there is more than enough to go around.

Jesus' unorthodox conduct raised eyebrows earlier in Luke's Gospel, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Yet his understanding of "repentance" seems to be just as unorthodox as his choice of companions. Note that not once does Jesus lecture the "sinners" who show up at his table. Nor does he require a "confession of sin" from them. Simply, their willingness (he calls it faith) to be in his presence is reason enough to celebrate.

Luke's parables reinforce this remarkable re-framing of repentance. The shepherd does not scold the sheep but carries it home on his shoulders. The woman does not pinch the coin but piles it in with the others. The father does not chastise but actually IGNORES the son's confession in his eagerness to plan a welcome home party. Repentance, on Jesus' terms, appears to be simply a willingness to be welcomed home, to come to the table, to join the party. As for lectures and scoldings and punishments, well, Jesus reserves those exclusively for the party poopers -

Pharisees, scribes, and older sons.

Underlying repentance is a preceding mercy that just keeps on searching - in the most unlikely places. This does not square with the world we know. In heaven, the ground of repentance looks quite different. And in God's good time, that joy will break out in an illuminating flash. A shepherd cares so much for one lost sheep that he leaves ninety-nine behind in the wilderness. A woman expends significant energy to find her lost coin, and then hosts a party that likely costs more than the coin or drachma, which is equal to a day's wages, is worth. A father showers gifts upon his disrespectful, wasteful son, simply because the kid shows up. Such are the ways of God.

The critical issue raised by the first two parables is not whether Jesus will modify his methods to conform to "acceptable" behaviour as defined by religious authority and custom. The crucial question was whether the Pharisees and scribes, who previously had grumbled about Jesus' behaviour, could be moved to participate in the joyous celebration over the restoration of a tax collector and sinner. What was at stake was whether they could recognize themselves in the symbol of that which had been lost but was now found. By their unrepentant criticism of Jesus, and their refusal to respond to his person and message, they demonstrated their solidarity with those who were opposed to God, and showed themselves to be "at home" in the devil's wilderness.

The third parable builds on the first two. Historically dubbed "The Prodigal

Son,” it is one of the most treasured stories from the public ministry of Jesus, and ranks with the birth narrative and “The Good Samaritan” among the most widely known stories from Luke’s Gospel. Just for the record - “prodigal” actually means “wastefully extravagant” which well describes the father rather than the son. The traditional title, notwithstanding, the story’s main focus is not on either of the sons but on the father. The story really has only one point viewed from two perspectives – the steadfast quality of the father’s love no matter what.

The father loved both sons. He took the initiative to reach out to both. Love so motivated his single-minded action toward each that he acted without consideration of public opinion or cultural restraint. Out of love for the younger son, the father hitched up his robe above his knees, ignoring the inclination to maintain his own public dignity, and galloped down the lane in full sight of his neighbours as his humiliated son came through the village toward him. Out of love for the elder son, the father left the festivities, deferring his social responsibilities as host of the celebration, to negotiate the elder son’s participatory inclusion. He offered his sons, equally, his compassion and generosity, not as evidence or proof of his love but as the fruits of his love.

By first-century standards, the prodigal son is way out of line. Not only does he ask for his share of the inheritance before his father is even dead (a highly presumptuous request that puts the whole family’s resources at risk) he runs off to a “distant country, separating himself from the people of God. He gets a job feeding unclean animals. He squanders all his money. His life choices are not the sort that

parents would make public by inviting the neighbours to a party.

The Greek verb for repentance actually means to change one's mind. That is, it represents a new way of understanding, a change of view, a way of seeing things that is different from before. Parables about repentance are designed to evoke repentance; that is, they reveal a new way of understanding.

As for the younger son, does he repent? Or is he simply looking for a way out of a terrible situation? On the one hand, the father extends his gracious welcome - *before* the son even has a chance to finish his confession speech. The parable says simply that the younger son "came to himself," or we might say came to his senses or remembered who he was.

We should not rush to the moment when the younger son "came to himself" in the pig sty in the far country as an instance of instant spiritual insight. He simply became realistic about his situation and what the options for improving his condition really were. His calculations and fantasized pleading were not at all informed by a grateful grasp of the inexhaustible depth of his father's love. He was stunned as the rest at the abruptly boisterous way his father cut his self-serving pleading short to embrace him and restore him and designate his return the occasion for a feast honouring him.

The elder son was equally shocked at his father's behaviour – and outraged at the imbalanced degree of the father's love. It had never occurred to him that he would even see his younger brother again, much less have to endure his restoration

as an honoured family member. He had written him off completely. As far as he was concerned, when the younger son abandoned the family, the family membership was reduced by one.

Once he learned what was happening, he could not bring himself even to name the younger son “brother,” instead he refers to him as “this son of yours.” In sharp contrast to the father’s generous response, the elder son complained bitterly against the younger son – *and* against the father’s injustice. That is more than just griping. People do that when they cannot stand to come to terms with the ways in which God chooses to deal graciously with human alienation.

From the eldest son’s perspective, such generosity is simply not fair. *He* shows up for work every day. *He* does his job, lives properly, follows the rules. When he discovers the feast and celebration being offered to the younger son, who most certainly does not deserve it, he launches into a bitter tirade.

For all his righteousness, he refuses to recognize his own privilege. The father reminds him: “Son [literally “child,” a term of affection] – you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” In one sentence, the father affirms the closeness of their relationship and gently reminds his eldest son that he loses nothing by welcoming his own brother home and joining in the celebrations.

The younger son symbolizes the “tax collectors and sinners” whom Jesus sought out for God. The elder son stands for the Pharisees and the scribes, then and now, who grumble. He is like those who are so preoccupied with guarding the

boundaries of God's grace they do not notice that with every act of line-drawing they exclude themselves. The extent to which one shares God's joy discloses the presence of glad, loving, gratefully obedient service – or its absence.

The popular reading of this parable tends to put the reader in the place of the lost son. In that scenario, we read this parable as a testament to the wonderful grace that God shows us when we turn from a life without God; as such it is a beautiful testament to something that God has done for us in our past, but gives us little insight into how we are to live the rest of our lives. So to read this parable with new eyes, I suggest that we accept our roles as members of the elite and place ourselves firmly in the role of the older brother.

The story tells us very little about the younger son's actions; Jesus spends much more time telling his audience about the father and brother. We know only that the younger brother asked his father for his inheritance while his father was still alive, and then lost it all living a morally lax life in a distant country. Whereas the father's reaction was to have compassion on his son and celebrate the return of a loved one, the older brother's immediate reaction is anger:

“All these years I have worked hard 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.” While the older brother seems to be rightly incensed, the father's response illuminates the wisdom we might glean from this text:

“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and

everything I have is yours.”

The older son claims that he has earned a higher position than his younger brother; he has earned the right to be provided for. The father is quick to remind him that he has always been provided for. He has always had access to the entirety of his father’s possessions. The older son is suffering from the blindness that privilege so often brings: the assumption that one’s status, be it social, economic, or religious, is the sole product of one’s hard work, rather than the coming together of numerous factors. We need to remember that we drink from wells we did not dig, and sit under shade trees we did not plant. We are the beneficiaries of so many who went before us; we are where we are because others have toiled, that it might be so.

If we resist the desire to view ourselves as the younger brother whose forgiveness is cause for celebration, and instead take up the mantle of the defiant older brother, then the parable doesn’t give us quite the same nostalgic sense of gratitude for God’s forgiveness.

Luke expected his community to not simply see itself on Jesus’ side, making common cause with him against all those who are viciously unresponsive. Rather, the community is also to consider what in its corporate life corresponds to the Pharisaic attitudes and scribal perspectives that caused them to become belligerent to the cause of Christ at the service of religion. When do we resent God’s undeserved goodness toward others instead of being joyfully celebratory? What makes us hostile rather than open to the options of being embraced by and embracing that loving,

restorative presence?

Only when the community of the Easter faith comes to grips with those faithless dimensions in its communal life will we correctly see ourselves in the lost sheep, the lost coin, and *both lost* brothers – that is among the tax collectors and sinners of our day whom Jesus continues to welcome and to invite for religious table-fellowship, and among those who disdain them.

Jesus ends his parable unresolved; we have no idea whether the older brother sees the wisdom in his father's actions. It is as if Jesus is looking beyond the parable to his audience; to us. It's as if Jesus is asking us, "Those who were dead have come to life. Will you join the celebration?"

Consider all three parables through the lens of Paul's letter to the Romans: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." We are invited to see the world through God's eyes and perhaps with him engage in the search. These parables are not about "the lost," but about the one who seeks out value, a characteristic of God.

Amen.