

Room for Everyone
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Jesus told the Parable of the Lost Son a long time ago. It still gets told over and over in different ways, in literature, in song, in real life. There is something so compelling about this story that even people who aren't followers of Jesus know it. While I have preached on this parable several times, this week I had another chance to turn this story upside down and inside out to see what new things might shake out from this familiar parable.

The Parable of the Lost Son is the third in a series of parables that Jesus tells as the "sinners" gather around him. The religious leaders are there too, though they are appalled that this rabbi would associate with the likes of these tax collectors and other sinners. Jesus hears their disapproval as they mutter under their breath and so Jesus tells these three parables – as much for the religious leaders listening-in as for his devoted audience.

The first parable is about a shepherd with 100 sheep. One of the sheep gets lost so the shepherd leaves the other 99 to go find the one lost sheep. A sheep doesn't get lost on purpose, it is just part of being a sheep (of very little brain). Nevertheless, the shepherd goes after it, though it might mean losing even more sheep in the process. The lost one is found and there is rejoicing and jubilation.

The second parable is the woman who loses one of her coins. Unlike a sheep, a coin cannot wander off, losing itself. Does the woman see the loss as her fault? All the more reason to persist in looking for the coin and then to have a celebration when it is found, sharing what little she has with her friends and neighbors.

The third parable is about a family of two sons and a father. We might wonder what is going on in this family that the younger son is so desperate to get away. Why does he so badly want to see the world? Is he just naturally curious and adventurous? Does he feel

beaten down by his older brother's devotion to the family rules? Is there conflict with his father? Does he bear so much ill will toward his father that he asks for the inheritance, almost as if he wishes his father dead? It's not known, I guess not important to the parable.

What we do know is that the younger finds out that adventure is okay but not quite what he is hoping for, especially after running out of money during a drought. He hits his lowest point, in a pig sty, salivating/drooling over the pigs' food. It is then that he remembers what he knows best. He remembers home. He makes a plan to return home, to grovel, to demean himself. He fully anticipates that he will be a worker under his brother's supervision. While it will be a miserable life, at least he will have something to eat, somewhere to sleep.

So, what about the father? For some reason, the father cooperates with the son's foolish idea of cashing out his inheritance. The father has enough confidence in who he is, that his son's choices, while a slap in the face to everything he has raised his son to be, does not send him, the father, off the deep end. He does not try to stop his son from leaving. He does not go looking for his son nor does he send out a search party. He stays home. He waits and watches in hope that his son will one day return. When the son does return, the father doesn't send the servants to fetch the son; the father runs down the road himself and throws his loving and protective arms around his long lost child.

We practically get through the whole story before we know anything at all about the other son, the older brother. He has stayed home. He has put in his time. He prides himself on doing the right thing: helping his father whenever and wherever he is needed.

But really, how unfair is it that this younger sibling would run off, taking his share of the inheritance, and disrespect the entire family by living life in the gutter. Could anything be more disdainful of the family's Jewish tradition than living and eating with pigs? Or

sleeping around! Really, that kind of impulsive behavior and irresponsible decision-making deserves to be penalized, not rewarded. What is their father thinking that he runs to meet this scoundrel with open arms of welcome and love. What could be more ridiculous and infuriating? Can it even be called love when you give a pass to behavior like that?

The grumbling of the older son does not stop or even dampen the celebration. “The lost has been found, let the festivities begin.” For this most special occasion, the father even instructs that the fattened calf, the prize of the herd, be butchered.

The menu is just one more thing for the older brother to complain about. While this might raise questions for today’s vegetarians and vegans, the brother doesn’t care so much about animal rights, he cares about his own rights. He has done everything right, by the book, helping his father, overseeing the workers and the fields, ensuring that the estate thrives and grows. He has never strayed, and yet in all the years of the effort he has given to keep the family business going, he has never gotten a party like this. Never even a puny little goat to share with his friends.

This good-for-nothing brother wanders back home and their father keeps saying, “Rejoice with me! My son, your brother, was dead but he has come back to life. He was lost and now is found”...

In the past I have read this story almost as if there are only two main characters: the bad boy who runs off and the father who prepares a grand welcome home party.

But this time let’s notice the setting for this parable, verse 1 and 2: *The tax collectors and the “sinners” were all gathering around Jesus to hear him – to listen to his teaching. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law murmured: “This person welcomes sinners and eats with them!”* And then the parables begin.

It is clear, isn't it, that the "tax collectors and sinners" are wayward, immoral, perverse, incorrigible, and Jesus who sits right there with them is the one who welcomes with open arms. It is pretty easy to move on from there and decide who else we think wanders far from God and ends up looking despicable in the pig sty...We who sit here, in church, get to decide who is lost. Maybe those of us who grew up in church would even rather read it this way – with just two characters, the "prodigal son / the lost son" and the loving father.

But as long as we are paying attention to the introduction of these parables, we better acknowledge those other listeners, the religious leaders, who are probably more like the obedient, older son. You know the poor guy, who is overlooked again, just an afterthought...What do the religious leaders and the older son do - what do we do - with this rejoicing and overflowing grace? If we are as good and faithful as the older brother we too may be suspicious of this gracious welcome home. It doesn't even feel like grace. It feels like a cheap trick. What good does it do to be a faithful and obedient sheep/coin/son? The only reward is the same invitation to the party that any neighbor gets when the sheep is rescued. The only recognition is a nod from the party planner thanking us for showing up. Don't we deserve more than that for toeing the line?

Is it even possible for these two brothers, these two siblings to live together at home with their parent? Can the younger sibling that has strayed ever live peaceably with the older sibling that has never left home, doesn't break the rules?

We are given a clue as to which son Jesus identifies with. Twice the father in the parable says, *"This brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."* Is Jesus the wandering one? Is Jesus, who will soon die and rise again, is Jesus the lost brother? Certainly the religious authorities see him that way. There he is, sitting with the sinners, just like the younger son hung out with prostitutes and gambled all his money away.

What a trickster, this Jesus. He is not only the one who welcomes us with loving arms but he knows what it is like to wander off and then be found. He knows what it is to be scorned by those who always do it right. And he makes room for everyone: the younger, the older, the parent.

At the end of the parable, both of the siblings are welcomed to the party. Both of them are invited to the feast. The younger one has returned home – surprised, overwhelmed and grateful to receive the love that is offered. But the older one? Well, they stand outside the party, angry and bitter, protesting at the injustice of grace and love. How long will they refuse to join the celebration? Will this one who has never been physically lost ever find a way to come home emotionally? spiritually? Let's pray that they will because in this home, none of us are lost, all of us are found.

"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

March 27, 2022 Hatfield Church of the Brethren