

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. 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. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. **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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" 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. 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." 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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."

SERMON

A disciple once complained to his master, 'you tell us stories, but you never reveal their meaning to us.' Said the master, 'how would you like it if someone offered you fruit and chewed it up before giving it to you?' Stories become 'new' to us when something in our own experience makes us ready to hear them.... No one can find your meaning for you.¹

Today's gospel reading has so many possible threads to follow. The hardest part in working with a rich story like this is in choosing just one to follow. The gift is that we can return to it again and again and find something new each time.

Before we dive into the story of the prodigal son, the waiting father and the elder brother, it's important to look at our opening verses and what's left out of our reading today - the verses in Luke 15: 4-10.

The opening verse of the chapter beings: Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him, and the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

...the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him...makes me think of the words of the prophet Isaiah, from last week... everyone who thirsts, come...listen carefully to me...incline your ear and listen to me. Listen, so that you may live...

Some came to listen to Jesus, others, the Pharisees and scribes were muttering into their beards about Jesus' welcoming the other, the unclean: sinners. The P and S didn't see themselves as sinners. That's what they have against Jesus here - he's welcoming the wrong crowd. Jesus overheard their comments, knew their hearts and so told them three stories that reveal the heart of God.

¹ Kurtz, Ernest, Ketcham, Katherine. 1992. *"The Spirituality of Imperfection"* Bantam Books.

Verse 4 begins: So he told them this parable... it's the story of the lost sheep - where the keeper of 100 sheep notices one is lost, and goes out to find it. The story ends with 'when found "he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors saying 'rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Jesus ends the story by saying there will be more joy in heaven over the one who repents than the 99 who need no repentance.

This story is followed immediately with "Or what woman...with Jesus launching into another parable, the one where the woman finds a lost coin, after carefully sweeping her house. When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors and says 'rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Again, Jesus ends with 'there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

While neither sheep nor coins can repent, these two parables aim not at calling 'sinners' to repentance but at calling the 'righteous' to join the celebration. Rejoice with me! They say. What's been lost is found. That's a cause to give thanks. God's grace is here.

In all three parables, what was lost belonged to the owner from the start. But unlike the first two, where first the owner of the sheep, then the owner of the coins, searches diligently for the one which is lost, it's not immediately clear who does the searching in this story.

It's here that our scripture for today picks up, with: Then Jesus said... there was a man who had two sons...

We hear of the younger son asking for his share of the inheritance, which, in the ancient world, was the equivalent of telling his father to drop dead. This is what the son says: “Dad, you are dead to me. And since once you’re dead your last will and testament kicks in, I’ll take my share now.” It’s a truly awful thing this son did and it makes him, properly, a real jerk. But that was just the point. In Jesus’ triplet of stories here, we go from a lost sheep who was of some value to a lost silver coin that was of significant monetary value to a lost son who, though once valued as a son, makes himself into a very grotesque and undesirable character. He’d be easy to write off. In fact, most people would write him off. Certainly the Pharisees would. And just here is where our story actually begins.²

The younger son leaves. No one stops him, no one goes searching for him. We’re told he spends all his money and ends up hiring himself out, feeding pigs - an unclean son, one who has called his father as good as dead, working for gentiles, feeding the most unclean of animals - pigs. This guy is at the absolute bottom of Jewish society - and he’s hungry, so hungry that he’s wishing he could eat the pig slop. This son is destitute, far from home, an outsider, hungry with no community, and not a soul who cares about him.

This next verse is what really caught my attention this week - it’s the turning point in the story. This is when this good for nothing son is found. The scripture says “But when he came to himself...” He is ‘found’ when his suffering is so great that he ‘came to himself’. His hunger is what found him. His suffering is what found him. I wonder, does it always take the brokenness of suffering for us to ‘come to ourselves’? It’s in the mire of the pig pen that the return begins for this prodigal son of ours. It’s here that he reclaims his

² Hoezee, Scott.

https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-4c-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

identity, and resolves to leave the far country and return to his own land and to his father.

It's here where this young man named both where he sinned AND what he believed -that he could still be in relationship with his family at some level, even if no longer as son and brother.

What did he believe, at this point in time? What might his "This I believe" statement have been? I believe in second chances... I believe in risking it all? I believe in forgiveness?

This verse - "He came to himself" - it's a hope-filled verse, for it affirms the human capacity to renounce our error, our sin and reclaim our heritage and potential. It takes work. It requires action. But it holds the potential of new life. Oh I love that line! "He came to himself." How many times have we suffered and stayed stuck, resentful, bitter, unwilling to see our part in our suffering?

In our story, HE came to himself is followed with - "I will get up and go to my father"... He's not just seeking to improve his circumstances; he realizes that he's sinned against both God and father. It's here that he repents. He names his failure and hatches a plan to return home and ask to be taken on as a servant.

The journey of return begins with coming to himself and ends with going to his father. He takes action. *The prophets of Israel over and over spoke of repentance as returning.*

The finding in this parable, unlike the two previous parables, where the God figure goes out seeking that which is lost - sheep, coins, this one hinges on the decision of the younger son. Yet somehow the father has been active as well, actively waiting. He has not given up hope, he has been watching and waiting, all this time. And when the son, the son who is rightfully dead to him, is sighted, we're told the father was filled with compassion and ran to him. He got up and broke into a run. In ancient Palestine grown

men didn't run - it was a sign of loss of dignity. But this father sets aside that concern and runs. He runs with enthusiasm and incredible compassion, hugging and kissing his son before the son has said anything. The son starts into his rehearsed speech, but before he can ask to be received back as a servant, the father interrupts him - calling for a robe and a ring and sandals - public signs of welcoming this son of his back into his house. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" Rejoice with me!

The older son now enters the story... he doesn't rejoice at his brother's return. He refuses to accept his return, refuses to rejoice with the father. He's angry, bitter, and won't even come say hello or join the party. As one who has identified with this older brother plenty of times in my life - well there's so much to say about this older brother...but that will have to wait -more on him another time...

This parable, as the two preceding it, ends with rejoicing. That's what Jesus is inviting his listeners to hear - God rejoices when just one is found. Just one. God's love risks all to go seeking that one, and when it's back in its place of belonging - all are invited to rejoice.

Here, in our story, the younger brother made a choice. Lots of choices - many of them bad ones. But he made some really important, transformative ones too. In his suffering he came to himself. And that made all the difference. In 'coming to himself' he chose to name his sin and repent. And in that movement from living apart from God and his father, he took the risk of claiming his mistakes and seeking new life. He chose to risk. Notice that he doesn't ask for forgiveness. He claims his wrongdoing and while his intention was to ask to be treated as a servant, he doesn't get that far in his speech. But when he set out, he didn't know what he would find back home. It took enormous

courage to follow through in his plan. It was a journey - from a far land back home, both physically and metaphorically, and we all know that when we return home, well, it's never quite the same. Who knew what he might find? What kind of father, God-figure, would greet him on his return?

This story encourages us to live into that risk too - for ourselves and with others, for our God is one of abundant mercy. That father had been watching and waiting, filled with compassion, ready to run and greet that one who was dead to him. That father figure/God figure was ready to rejoice - to celebrate and welcome him in.

In this story Jesus both invites us to come back home - to be welcomed in with undeserved abundance and mercy, and also to rejoice. Can we rejoice when we see another receive grace, when we ourselves receive grace - maybe undeserved in our eyes? There's something in us that we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others.

The opportunity to restore relationships, to come home, to remedy wrongs, begins with coming to oneself, AND it requires more. It requires action.

But how about the rejoicing? We hear of the father calling others to rejoice with him. We know the older brother didn't join in the joy of welcoming in the one who was lost. Did the younger son? Was he able to forgive himself, to receive his father's abundant mercy and love and also rejoice? We can get stuck in what some writers call 'the trance of unworthiness', where we aren't able to receive the love, rejoice in our own transformations.

These parables are about rejoicing when the lost are found. That's our call today too - to notice our places of sinfulness, to 'come to ourselves', repent maybe, as the bumper

sticker says 'to wag more and bark less', and to rejoice when not just when others are found, but maybe also when *we* are found, allowing the love of God to embrace us, welcome us home, in our moments of meanness, our moments of hard heartedness, and smallness. And to rejoice. What might be be like if we trust that we, too, are worthy of God's embrace, and rejoice when we are found?

May it be so. Amen.