

4th Sunday in Lent, Year C

Luke 15 1-3, 11-32 *The Prodigal Son*

¹ The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, ² but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ So to them he addressed this parable. ... ¹¹ Then he said, “A man had two sons, ¹² and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. ¹³ After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. ¹⁴ When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. ¹⁵ So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. ¹⁶ And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. ¹⁷ Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. ¹⁸ I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.”’ ²⁰ So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ ²² But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began. ²⁵ Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. ²⁷ The servant said to him, ‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ He said to his father in reply, ‘Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. ³⁰ But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. ³² But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’”

Introduction. This chapter is bound together by the theme of joy over the recovery of what was lost. All three parables of Luke 15 (the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son) point to the idea of the return of one that was lost. To the simple structure of lost/found/joy, in the Prodigal Son parable, there is further development of the theme of God’s love and the contrast of the older brother’s hostility. Luke uses this motif to teach a newer, more full meaning of repentance.

In the first two parables, Jesus addresses his listeners directly: “What man among you ...?” “Or what women..?” However attractive the extravagant response of the shepherd or woman, the practical answer is “no one.” One stays with the 99 and one does spend so much effort for such a small coin. But the unspoken reply is “And this is what God is like...” In a split second we are drawn into God’s world, seeing and acting as he would. The shepherd’s joy is like God’s joy; his dedication to the individual sheep, carrying it back to the flock, is a reflection of God’s love. The joy in heaven is over the “one sinner who repents” (*metanoia*) as compared to the “...ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.”

A different image is used in a second parable to the same effect. The woman has lost one of her ten *drachmas*, Greek silver coins. She turns her house upside down in search of this one coin in ten. Her joy is like the joy in heaven over one repentant sinner. This parable repeats the point that such joy needs to be shared. It is too great for one person. She and the shepherd invite their friends and neighbors for the thanksgiving party. What about the other nine silver pieces and the ninety-nine sheep — are they not important, too? Surely, but the joy of the kingdom breaks out of the ordinary categories of reason and good business. What was given up as lost has been found. It is like a new life, a resurrection, and must be celebrated.

The Prodigal Son. The traditional title of the parable focuses on the younger son who left home, yet it is the father who is the central figure. Perhaps a better title would be “The Parable of a Father’s Love.” The parable, the longest in the Gospels, consists of three main parts: (1) the departure of the younger son to a distant land where he squanders his inheritance (vv.11-19), (2) the homecoming of the son and welcome by his father (vv.20-24), and (3) the episode between the father and the older son who stayed at home (vv.25-32). How this parable differs is that what is lost is a human person – one who has existing human relationships with his father and his brother. The younger son’s *metanoia* is not simply a change of his mind in absence of these relationships. Repentance necessarily involves those relationships.

A Note about Jewish Inheritance Customs. The relationships with the Father is the central axis of the parable, yet it is good to know something about inheritance customs. In the ancient world, not less than now, a person’s property is transferred at death. Fathers were discouraged from distributing inheritance during their lifetime (Sirach 33:20-24). But if he did, a father still was entitled to live off the proceeds while he lived. This can be seen in the following wisdom advise:

To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, lest you change your mind and must ask for it. At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hours of death, distribute your inheritance (Ecclesiasticus 33:19-23).

Other scripture includes that according to Deuteronomy 21:17, the firstborn son was to inherit twice as much as any other heir. The Jewish Mishna, which was probably developing in the time of Jesus, gives this rule: “If one assign in writing his estate to his son to become his after his death, the father cannot sell it since it is conveyed to his son, and the son cannot sell it because it is under the father’s control” (*Baba Bathra* viii.7). Even if a father decided to divide up his property among his heirs, neither the father nor the heirs could dispose of the property while the father was still alive.

In our parable, the younger son presumes upon the father’s prerogative and initiates the events with his request for his inheritance. Not only did he ask for his inheritance, which was bad enough, but he did something that was unthinkable and contrary to scripture and custom: he sold his inheritance, converted it to money (see note on 15:13) and moved to Gentile lands. The younger son’s actions spoke volume. By demanding his share and leaving, the younger son is cutting his ties with his family, with no regrets. He takes everything with him; there is no reasonable hope that he will be back. His departure with a substantial share of the family estate also means a loss to his father and brother, adding to the latter’s animosity.

The Departure of the Younger Son. The parable begins with the younger son asking for what he considers his share of the inheritance – something that is for the father to decide. In the asking, the son communicates that he does not view the inheritance as a gift given because of his father’s good graces; rather he sees it as his due.

Kenneth Bailey, a NT scholar who lived for years in the Middle East, asked many people in the Near East cultures how one is to understand the younger son’s request. The answer is consistent and

harsh: the son would rather have his father dead so as to gain the inheritance. In an honor/shame society it would be appropriate to ask, “What father having been asked by a son to give him inheritance...” Again the Lucan answer is not the answer of the society. The father grants the request. Where the younger son asks for “*the share of your estate (ousia) that should come to me.*” Luke tells us that the father “*divided between them his property (bios, literally “life” – see note on 15:12).*”

Imagination can fill in the familiar story line that is compressed with great economy: the extravagant spending, the attraction of freeloading friends, the crash. It should be noted that the young man squandered (*diaskorpizo*) the money. This does not imply a use for immoral reasons (which the brother suggests in v.30), but rather a thoughtless use of the funds. In any case, he becomes penniless and is reduced to tending swine for the Gentiles. For the Hebrew, caring for pigs evoked the idea of apostasy and the loss of everything that once identified the younger son as a member of his family and of God’s people. He is even lower than the swine — they have access to the husks, but he does not.

The Homecoming of the Son and Welcome by His Father. Calamity finally brings him to his senses. He will return to his home as a hired servant. He carefully rehearses his speech: “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.*” He expects to be treated with cold reserve and suspicion. But his father still loves him.

Tashjian notes “As Westerners we cannot really understand what the father has done unless we put ourselves in the context of Eastern culture and way of thinking. The son had dishonored his father and the village by taking everything and leaving. When he returns in tattered clothes, bare-footed and semi-starved, he would have to get to the family residence by walking through the narrow streets of the village and facing the raised eye-brows, the cold stares, the disgusted looks of the town people. So when the son is still far off, before he has entered the outskirts of the village, the father sees him and decides immediately what he must do. In compassion for his son and to spare him the pain of walking through the gauntlet of the town alone, he runs to him, falls on his neck, and kisses him.”

The father has been keeping vigil and sees his son coming “*a long way off.*” Anything but coolly reserved, he runs to meet his son, hugging and kissing him. The son cannot get through his rehearsed speech. Ironically he does complete the “confessional” part of the speech, but the reconciliatory part is not the son’s role, but rather that of the Father, who makes his intentions immediately known: “*Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.*” These show that the young man’s father fully accepted him as his son. The robes and the ring were signs of high position in the family. Sandals showed that he was a son instead of a slave, since slaves did not usually wear sandals. There is no thought of recrimination, no policy of making the young man prove himself worthy. The only important thing is that he is alive. The son himself is more important than anything he has done.

One curious element of this portion of the parable is this: did the father interrupt the son before the young man reached the “hired worker” portion of the prepared speech? Or did the young man simply stop, already seeing the action of his father to run to him, perhaps the joy on his face, and come to know that he was already forgiven and restored as a member of the family?

The Episode Between the Father and the Older Son Who Stayed at Home. The story would be complete as it stands with the return of the prodigal son and the father’s open-armed acceptance. But another story interlocks with this one. The elder son’s anger and self-righteousness make him resentful; not even the return of his brother will make him share the family celebration. The tragedy here is that while the older son has never left home, never disobeyed, and has “slaved” faithfully – he has also never felt rewarded and thus resents the father’s joy at his brother’s return. In contrast to joy, the older son feels anger or rage which is freely expressed in every gesture (refusal to enter the house)

and word (his responses to his father). The anger he feels for his father is transferred to his brother. The older son has not only failed to recognize his privileged position with his father, but he is also blind to the fact that his father offers him the same constant care and concern – the father comes out to him also, seeking what is being lost.

Again the pivot is the father's love. He goes out to the elder son as he went out to the younger. He wants both of them to be happy. The elder son cannot see beyond propriety and is trapped in his own righteousness. The father does not deny the faithfulness of his elder son. He implies that all that is beside the point at this special moment. Something far more important is going on: a son and brother has returned from the dead. Everything else fades before that fact: "*But now we must celebrate and rejoice!*" Within the father's words are this key message: "one cannot be a son without also being a brother."

The father has extended unconditional forgiveness to both sons *prior to their repentance*. Despite each son's contemptuous behavior, the father assures them they are loved and belong. The attitude of the father is not determined by their attitude, but by his own attitude. Martin Luther's first theses was that "the entire life of the believer should be one of repentance." While doctrinally correct, it is not achievable in human effort. Even the mostly stoutly religious, in the end, must rely on the grace of God. When all is said and done in this life, having lived well or no, one must leave all in the hands of a merciful and gracious God.

Notes

15:2 and eats with them: *synesthio*. This phrase should echo the entire of Luke 14, the preceding chapter in which table fellowship is one of the central controversies of the narrative.

15:12 share of your estate: literally "the share of the property (*ousia*) that falls to me"

divided his property between them: where in the first part of the verse Luke uses *ousia*, here the word *bios* (life) is used. Some scholars point out there is precedence for the *ousia* and *bios* being synonyms for the word "property." I would suggest this play on words points to an aspect, not the most important for sure, but an aspect of the story that involves inheritance laws and traditions in the ancient Near East.

15:13 collected all his belongings: literally, "after gathering everything together." This identical phrase is used in the works of Plutarch (*Cato Min.* 6.7) that means converting everything to silver. It is likely, given his travels, to have converted his inheritance into money.

a distant country: indicating a psychological as well as geographical distancing.

squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation: *diaskorpizo* (squandered) does not imply a use for immoral reasons (which the brother suggests in v.30), but rather a thoughtless use of the funds.

15:14 a severe famine: Biblical literature suggests that this was a frequent occurrence in an area in which agriculture was always a hazardous enterprise.

15:15 to tend the swine: As in the story of the Gadarene demoniac (8:32), the herd of pigs represents something unclean for the Jews (cf. Lev 11:7; 14:8). To tend the pigs of a Gentile is as alienated as a Jew could imagine. Raising pigs was forbidden by the Mishnah.

15:17 Coming to his senses: literally, "came to himself." It should be noted that Luke does not use his normal word for repentance – a word he uses over 25 times in his writings. One might argue that this is the son's moment of repentance, but a more likely suggestion is that the young man is not in misery because of his sense of sin, but because he has fallen on hard times. The young man is not repentant, but practical.

hired workers: *misthos*, refers to day laborers, i.e., people without steady employment, who have no ongoing relationship to a particular farm or family. This status would be even less than an indentured servant.

15:18 I have sinned...no longer deserve...treat me: The planned three-fold statement is (a) a confession of guilt, (b) admission of the destroying the father-son relationship, and (c) a possible solution for the father's plight. But one wonders what the young man thought his sin was? His insolence? His realization that he is unable to provide for his own father in the father's retirement years?

15:19 your hired workers: The contrast here is between a member of the family (and heir to the property) and a *misthos*, and hired laborer with claim of permanence. Notice in v.22 that the father calls to one of the *doulos* (servant or slave) to wait upon the returned son. In v.29 "*all these years I served you*" incorporates the noun *douleúō* "to serve as a slave."

15:20 filled with compassion: compassion (*splanchnizomai*) occurs a dozen times and only the Gospels. Elsewhere the term expresses the divine compassion of God.

ran...embraced...kissed: Even though the father has compassion, the proper response would be for him to let the young man fall to his knees and humble himself before his father. The father would respond with forgiveness and a review of the new expectations – in other words, probation. The father's action lack the expected decorum. In some Arabic translations of this parable, the translators refuse to describe the father as "running" so inappropriate and shameful is the action. The literal translation of what follows is the father "fell upon his neck" and began to *kataphiléō* (kiss passionately).

15:22 finest robe...a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet: indicate that the young man's status is as that of a member of the household and not that of a servant. The description of the robe could also be suitably translated as "most prominent robe." There are texts which indicate that the giving of the ring means the prodigal son has supplanted the older brother as the heir (cf. Gen 41:42.; 1 Macc 6:15, Esther 3:10; 8:2). The sandals are a sign of freedom and mastery. In the semitic languages, the most formal of greetings literally translates as "I hold your feet," the action of a slave to his master.

15:23 the fatted calf: Meat was not part of the daily diet. The whole animal would have to be eaten in a short time or the meat would spoil, so the father is expecting a large group. Perhaps the whole village will be invited. The father is not planning a quiet family gathering but is making a public gesture to proclaim his acceptance of his son so that the whole community will follow suit.

15:24 dead...come to life...lost...found: A son who dies and is found again can not but have deeper resonances for Christian readers of all ages and times.

15:25 in the field: the older son is hardworking and loyal. Note that he is not told of his brother's arrival, but on his way home realizes there is a festive celebration already underway.

15:27 safe and sound: The meaning of the Greek word is to be healthy, to be sound. But it is also the word that the Septuagint uses to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, peace, which is much more than physical health.

15:29 note that the older son never greets or addresses his father as "father." This is in contrast to his prodigal brother in v.27.

served you: *douleuo* is derived from the Greek *doulos*, a slave. The older son does not see his own status as son, but sees himself even lower than the servants/hired hands (*misthos*; vv.17, 19) called to prepare the feast. In Greek the verb is rendered in the present tense giving the sense that the son still feels bound in slavery. Such an expression by the oldest son reveals great bitterness.

not once did I disobey your commands: within the Gospel, these words point to the attitudes of the Pharisees and scribes who did not need “repentance” as they kept Moses’ law.

never gave me even a young goat: the language again reflects the older son’s bitterness. The *eriphos* (kid goat) is in comparison to the fatted calf (*moschos*) of v.23 prepared for the the prodigal son. The former is a more common and cheaper commodity. But also note that the kid goat was for celebration with his friends, not his father. He is alienated even though he never left home.

15:30 your son: He does not say “my brother” but literally says “this son of yours here, the one who...” The language is angry and distancing. In vv.29-30 the older son has essentially excoriates his father for not being grateful for his obedience and so tries to humiliate and shame his father.

15:31 my son: despite the abusive and shameful words, the father does address his oldest as *technon*, a term perhaps better translated as “beloved child.”

you are here with me always; everything I have is yours: Where the oldest saw himself as a “slave” the father affirms he is companion and co-owner of all that the father has.

15:32 your brother: subtly the father corrects the older one’s “this son of yours..” to remind him that the one who has returned, been restored, is also in relationship with the whole of the family.

with prostitutes: The older son provides a lurid, imagined version of the younger son’s ways while abroad – something the narrative had not given. Is this an echo within the parable of the charges levied against Jesus and the disciples for those with whom they would share table fellowship?

Sources:

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Additional Commentary

In addition to my own writing, this section contains ideas and text from Brian Stoffregen and Jirair Tashjian. See the “Sources” section for references.

In the above commentary, there was the suggestion that Luke has more to say about repentance. The commentary even asserts that the father has extended unconditional forgiveness to both sons *prior to their repentance*. What then does this say about the fuller meaning of repentance?

The parable of the Lost Sheep ends with: “*I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.*” The parable of the Lost Coin ends with: “*In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*” On one hand, that presents an absurd image. The idea of a sheep repenting is only slightly less absurd than the idea of a coin repenting.

Richard Jensen (*Preaching Luke's Gospel*, p.167) suggests "The only possible action in this story that could constitute repentance is the *finding of the lost*. Repentance, therefore, may be defined as our acceptance of being found. Jensen goes on to write, "Repentance is our acceptance of the reality that God has found us in Jesus Christ. This means, of course, that we acknowledge our own "lostness." [p. 169]. He points this out specifically in the case of the prodigal son: "The father simply gives him back his sonship as an act of grace. The son accepts. He repents: he accepts being found!" [p. 175]

If we take the meaning of *metanoeo* as "to change one's mind," then it seems that Jensen is suggesting that the object of "changing one's mind" is not a generalized view of things – although that is good and helpful – but rather one's understanding of one's relation to the other is changed. The moment of repentance is not the prodigal son's speech of vv.18-19, but the action of the father in restoring him to sonship and the prodigal son's acceptance of that state.

Brian Stoffregen notes that "A slightly different image of repentance might be noted when one realizes that what was lost originally belonged to the owner/father from the start. Repentance, then, might be understood as the restoration of a lost relationship, rather than the creation of a relationship that never existed before. I wonder how this applies to evangelism which frequently assumes that the "lost" are people who have no relationship with God. Should [our] starting point be that God, as Creator, has established a relationship with all people? Or that Christ's death and resurrection establishes a relationship with all sinners?"

In such a dynamic of repentance, joy is an appropriate response. And such is Luke's message: "Rejoice with me" (*sygchairo* vv. 6 & 9). This emotion is written large throughout the entire chapter: *cf. chairo* = "rejoice" in vv. 15:5, 32; *chara* = "joy" in vv. 15:7, 10; and *euphraino* = "rejoice, celebrate" in 15:23, 24, 29, 32. Joy is the emotion of repentance! The Pharisees and scribes in the introduction will not rejoice with Jesus over the sinners who eat with him. Instead they criticize. The older son will not rejoice; he criticizes.

In a sense all three parables end with unanswered questions: Will the friends and neighbors of the shepherd rejoice with him? Will the friends and neighbors of the woman rejoice with her? Will the older son rejoice with his father who eats with his son? Often the point of a parable is the unanswered question which the hearer is left to answer. Will we rejoice with the heavenly host over sinners being found and repenting?

Culpepper (*Luke, New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 298) expands this thought and perhaps suggests another aspect of "repentance" (*metanoeo* = literally, "to change one's way of thinking") required in these parables:

Neither sheep nor coins can repent, but the parable aims not at calling the "sinners" to repentance but at calling the "righteous" to join the celebration. Whether one will join the celebration is all-important because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy. Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude themselves from God's grace. (*cited in Stoffregen*)

If one refuses to join our Father in heaven with all the angels in rejoicing, then we are in need of repentance. If we insist on reward for our obedience and righteousness, we need only remember that God does not commend the righteous for what they ought to be in the first place. Nor has he criticized their standards. When God reaches out to those *we consider* in need of repentance, what God expects of us is that we share His joy over what was once lost but now found. That we set aside bread, water, ashes, sackcloth, tears, and prostration for the fatted calf, the finest robes and rings, music and dancing, and the celebration of joy. Quite the Lenten image, heh?