

Sermon for Lent Four 2025

St. Luke/San Lucas Episcopal Church

Luke 15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strengthen and our salvation.

The parable has been known as the Prodigal Son since around 357, when one of the early church fathers, Jerome, wrote about it in one of his works. This allegorical view of the parable, with God as the patient and forgiving father, and humans as either the prodigal younger son or the resentful elder son, has been a staple of Sunday school curriculum throughout the years. Many of us may even remember it from our own early days in the church. And I imagine that a lot of sermons today will focus on going astray, repentance and redemption.

I'm going to ask you to do something a bit different. I'd like you to take what you know about this parable, to take all those wonderful lessons and sermons you've heard through the years, and put them on a shelf. Don't throw them away—there's a lot of value and comfort in this view of the story, as one of repentance and acceptance and love. However, I'd ask you to put it away for the moment, and open your minds to another, very different, view of this passage.

New Testament professor and author, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, presents another view of the parables, based in part on her background as a Jewish scholar. In her works, she suggests

that, to the extent we can, we try to peel back all those centuries of Christian interpretation and gloss that have grown up around the parables, and instead, that we put ourselves into the shoes of those first-century Jewish people who were listening to the learned, provocative rabbi, Jesus, and his teachings.¹

As we dive into this text, the first thing to note is that our lectionary actually leaves out quite a bit. We have the introduction, that tells us who the audience was—a very diverse and divided group, consisting of tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and scribes. All living under Roman occupation, during a time of extreme poverty and widespread oppression. At a time when it was dangerous, or at least not entirely safe, to gather together, these people had all risked attending this meeting, to hear this voice of Jesus.

What follows is a series of three parables, the third of which is the continuation of our gospel today. However, there is an important thread running through these three stories, and it is helpful to look at all of them in order to have an understanding of the third. So, let's do a quick review.

The first parable is known as the Parable of the Lost Sheep. A shepherd gathers up his flock of 100 sheep at the end of the day. However, as he counts them, he realizes that one is missing. So, even though he is probably tired and hungry after his long day's work, he puts the 99 sheep into the pen, picks up his staff and heads back out, looking for the one missing sheep. He keeps looking until he finds it, puts it on his shoulders, and carries it

¹ Levine, Dr. Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus*.

back to the pen to be with the others. The shepherd rejoices. The flock, the community is complete, and safe. Whole once again.

The second parable is known as the Parable of the Lost Coin. A woman had ten silver coins. However, when she went to find them, one was missing. She proceeds to turn her house upside down, looking for them. Getting out the broom and sweeping into the darkened corners, she finally finds her lost coin. And when she finds it, she rejoices. She gathers her friends and neighbors together. She celebrates with them. She brings together her community and share her wealth and her joy with them. The community is made whole.

And now we come to the third parable, the one included in our reading today. In some traditions, including in the Orthodox churches, this is known as the Parable of the Lost Sons. It begins with a man who had two sons. Like the other two stories, the man loses something. In this case, it is his younger son, who takes his share of what would be his inheritance, and travels to a distant land to live a wild and crazy life. The NRSE describes it as a “dissolute living” which is frankly the PG version. Other translations translate this using more R- or even X-rated terms. The younger son soon finds himself without funds, lost and alone and hungry, in a foreign land, working at a menial job.

So, of course, learning of this, the father immediately gathers up his servants, packs his bags, and sets out to find his lost son. Except, wait, that’s not what the parable says, is it? That’s what we would expect, after hearing the first two stories, where the person who has lost something spares no effort to find it and, once it is found, rejoices and celebrates that the community is whole once again. So, wouldn’t we expect the same to happen here?

Wouldn't we expect that a loving, caring father would go out searching for his lost, suffering child?

But that's not what Jesus said. Instead, Jesus uses the technique of the parable, putting a twist in the tale, throwing the listener a curve ball, catching us off guard, being provocative, in order to make the audience question, and think differently.

This father doesn't go looking for his son. Looking closely at the text, we can see various clues as to what this father did instead. The father, despite giving away half of his wealth, was still a rich man. He has servants, and lands (his other son was out working in the fields). He has calves, including at least one who was fatted, ready for slaughter. He has more than one robe, since he calls for his servants to bring "the best" robe for his son. He has enough money to provide a ring for his returning son. This father was taking care of himself, enriching himself, ensuring his own survival. And in doing so, he lost both his sons. They were both living, but he did not have a close, loving relationship with either of them.

The father's self-centeredness is particularly apparent in his relationship with the older son. The son is out working in the fields. When the younger son returns and the celebration begins, the father doesn't send out a messenger to the fields to let the older son know that his brother has returned. No, he just lets the older son go on working. The older son has no idea what is happening until he hears the noise of the party and asks one of the servants what is going on. Can you imagine being the older son? Left out in the fields, working and earning money, while daddy dearest and your wastrel younger brother are partying away?

Is it any wonder that the older son is angry? And the father's response, that you are always with me, that all that is mine is yours, but that 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, that rings a bit hollow, given that they didn't even remember to send someone out to the field to let the older son know. How can he rejoice when he isn't even included in the news?

And Jesus' story ends rather abruptly. We don't know if the younger son was reconciled with his brother. We don't know if the older son felt that his father's explanation was enough. Unlike the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, there is no happy ending to this story, no "and they all lived happily ever after." Just the father lecturing the older son on what he should be feeling, on how he should rejoice.

Now, at this point, some of you may be feeling uncomfortable. I certainly am. This isn't the loving father figure that we are used to hearing about in the parable. It's not the dedicated father who will search high and low for his lost son.

Remember, this is the point of a parable. It is to make the listener uncomfortable. To upend the way we normally view things. To raise complex questions, so that we can take another, different look at our lives.

So, what is Jesus trying to do here? What is he trying to say to the sinners and tax collectors, to the scribes and Pharisees?

Perhaps Jesus' message to his diverse and divided audience is that, to be made whole, to become a community again, they need to focus on each other, to look out for each other, to put in the effort of looking for those who are lost, as the shepherd did.

Perhaps Jesus was making the point that those who, like the father, focus on making money, or looking for power, are in danger of losing their relationship with those around them, as opposed to the woman who looked for her coin in order to share with her friends and neighbors, with her community.

Perhaps Jesus is reminding the sinners and scribes that they are all members of the same family, and that they need to take care of each other, or their community will be torn apart, just as the rich man's family was torn apart. That joy is found when each sinner repents, when each person is brought back into the community, and when the entire community welcomes them home.

We don't know for sure just what Jesus' intention was with this series of parables. But it certainly is provocative. It does leave us with questions. And it provides us with both a warning and a reason for hope.

The warning, which is as true for us today, living in our very divided society, as it was for the sinners and tax collectors, scribes and Pharisees, is that if we focus on ourselves, on our security and enrichment, and we lose sight of those around us. If we neglect those who are working hard to take care of the community. If we don't make an effort to search out those who are lost, who are struggling. We are in danger of becoming like the father, who lost his sons. We can also lose our family, our community, our wholeness.

But there is hope. The first two parables demonstrate what can happen if we put ourselves out there, if we actively search out and find those who have gone astray, those who are

struggling. If we search for those who are lost, we can then rejoice, together, when they are found; our community can be made whole again.

So, the questions we have before us today are these. Who are those among us who have gone astray? Who are those who are struggling? Who are those in our lives, in our community, in our nation, who are lost? And are we ready to go out into the world, to search them out? What are we going to do to restore those among us who are hurting to wholeness, to bring the lost to safety? What actions are we going to take so that we can all, sinners and scribes alike, rejoice.

Amen.