

## Loving the Way God Wants

In today's Gospel, Luke gives us one of Jesus's most beloved parables. We call it the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," but it could be the "Parable of the Two Sons" or the "Parable of the Forgiving Father." We know this story and these characters so well that there may not seem to be much new to say. There's the spendthrift younger son, his angry older brother, and the merciful father. We can learn something by comparing ourselves to any of them. Today, though, let's focus on the people who inspired Jesus to tell this story, the Pharisees and scribes who are scandalized to see Jesus sit down to dinner with a motley crew of tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus is well aware that his critics disapprove of his choice of friends. He could just argue with them. Instead, he reframes the debate by telling not one but three parables. Our lectionary skips the first two, probably for brevity's sake. If we want to understand why Jesus chose to tell the Parable of the Prodigal Son, however, we should at least glance at the two parables he tells first. In the Parable of the Lost Lamb, a shepherd abandons his flock of ninety-nine sheep to look for the one that wandered away. In the Parable of the Lost Coin, a woman searches her house from top to bottom until she finds a missing silver shekel. Jesus concludes both parables by telling the Pharisees and scribes that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous souls. Only then does he launch into the Parable of the Prodigal Son. With that context, we can surmise that Jesus wants the Pharisees and scribes to see themselves not in the younger son or the father in this story, but in the self-righteous older son who refuses to come inside and celebrate when his scapegrace brother returns.

As Bible scholar Fred B. Craddock points out, "this story has been embraced by many persons who have not felt the full impact of the offense of grace that it dramatically conveys." This story is so familiar that we accept its premise without question. Jesus's opening words,

“[t]here was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘give me my share of the estate,” sounds to us like “once upon a time.” And society has changed in two thousand years. Today, we expect young adult children to be eager to go out and conquer the world while exhibiting questionable financial judgment. We may not realize that Jesus’s audience would hear the younger son’s request as nothing gentler than, “Dad, I wish you were dead because I want your money.” Then, children never inherited before their fathers died. Property was divided according to strict rules, with the eldest son receiving a double portion. For a farming family like this one, wealth was held in land and livestock. The father couldn’t whip out his checkbook or drop a deposit in a brokerage account. He would have had to sell property to grant his younger son’s request, sacrificing a third of his own future income. Their neighbors would gossip, ruining the family’s reputation. The Pharisees and scribes would have shared the older son’s indignation when the father indulged his younger son’s disrespectful demand.

If the beginning of this parable raised their eyebrows, the Pharisees and scribes would have been horrified by what the father did when his younger son came limping home. A dignified Judean patriarch never ran, especially not to embrace a son who had insulted him and discredited the family name. That boy had no hope of being taken back as a beloved son until his father surprised him and Jesus’s listeners by providing the robe, ring, and sandals that all symbolized the younger son’s restoration to a place in his family, then arranging a feast that would generously serve a hundred people. The Pharisees and scribes were probably as offended by the father’s profligate welcome of the prodigal as they had been by the boy’s initial, insolent request.

Jesus’s critics might have sympathized with the older son’s refusal to join the feast. They would have been shocked that the father came outside because Judean patriarchs did not plead with their progeny, either. Still, they wouldn’t have approved of how the older son castigated his

dad. “Honor thy father and thy mother” was and still is one of the Ten Commandments. By the point where the father gently replied that the family had to celebrate “because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found,” the Pharisees and scribes were probably beside themselves. Jesus turned all their expectations upside down and called it virtue. Perhaps they concluded that he welcomed tax collectors and sinners not to defy sacred law but because he had no idea what rabbis should teach or how decent people should behave.

This parable is traditionally explained as a lesson in God’s endlessly generous love. As children, we’re taught to see ourselves in the younger son and to trust that God will always forgive us if we turn away from sin. It’s a good lesson, and the parable offers still more. As we mature, honesty may compel us to identify with the older brother. Those of us who grew up playing by the rules and taking only what we were given are easily enraged when somebody else seems to get more while doing less. Much of the anger surging through our public discourse right now echoes the older son’s envy. “I worked hard and did what I was told my whole life. Why should ‘they’ get more than I got when they didn’t do what I did?” You can decide who “they” might be. Suffice it to say, the father in this parable is awfully quick to lavish grace on someone who doesn’t seem to deserve it. To those of us who think we do, that feels offensively unfair.

Many illustrious theologians presume that the father in this parable represents our Father God. They’re probably right, but I wonder. This father isn’t as perfect as our Father in heaven. If nothing else, he presides over a pretty dysfunctional family. Although that may be a reasonable way to describe humankind, this parable makes more sense to me if we understand the father to be not God himself, but someone who loves his sons the way God wants us to love one another. The shepherd, the woman, and the father in these three parables have all lost something precious. They all go to exceptional lengths to find it, and they all rejoice when they do. If the father in this

parable is God, it lets us off the hook because fallible human creatures can't love each other as wholeheartedly as God does. But if the father is just a person, like a shepherd, a housekeeper, a Pharisee, a scribe, or one of us, this parable poses a challenge. Jesus came for the lost. I believe that Jesus was asking his Father's priests to actively seek and save people that they had written off as sinners. He wanted them to love and accept all of God's people and rejoice greatly whenever lost souls returned to the community without worrying too much about why they had gone astray to begin with. And by leaving these parables where his best storyteller, St. Luke, could find and deliver them to us, Jesus asks his followers to do the same.

As Bible scholar Justo González observes, Jesus addresses this parable to the “never lost,” those of us who flatter ourselves that we've never gone astray and never will, not realizing that claiming to be free from sin is a surefire way to fall into it. By refusing to go to dinner, the older son denied his father, brother, and himself the joy of reconciliation. By refusing to eat with the taxpayers and sinners, the Pharisees and scribes denied themselves the precious chance to minister to those who needed them. Just as he asked the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus asks us to get over ourselves and come to dinner so we can all celebrate together.

Everyone gets lost now and then. It doesn't have to be a tragedy. Jesus wants us to notice when somebody has gone missing and do our best to bring them back. It won't necessarily be easy or pleasant. Lost people aren't always polite, grateful, or eager to leave whatever drew them away in the first place. Some get tangled up in situations from which only God can bring them safely home, and some are quick to blame others for their mistakes. We won't always succeed, but we need to do our best. Jesus calls us to love one another as the prodigal's father loved his sons because that's the way God wants us to love. May we answer his call with open hearts, and whenever the lost are found and returned, may we gratefully rejoice. *Amen.*