

## The Parable of the Lost Sheep

**15** Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

<sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' <sup>7</sup>Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

## The Parable of the Lost Coin

<sup>8</sup>"Or what woman having ten silver coins,<sup>[a]</sup> if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup>When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' <sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

## The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

<sup>11</sup>Then Jesus<sup>[b]</sup> said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with<sup>[c]</sup> the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>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! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>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.'<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'<sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' <sup>31</sup>Then the father<sup>[e]</sup> said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>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.'"

**March 31, 2019**

**Luke 15:1-32**

**“Cause for Celebration”**

**Kerra Becker English**

There's a set up for this parable, or really set of three parables crafted to make the same point.

Tax collectors and sinners are coming around to listen to Jesus. Frequently. Consistently.

Jesus has a congregation of people who WANT to listen to what he has to say.

The Pharisees and Scribes were also preachers and teachers, but their audience wasn't all that thrilled about being there anymore. Attendance was dropping. Enthusiasm was nowhere to be found.

And this guy, this guy, who they had taught in their own way from the time he was 12 was bending the rules and then drawing a crowd. It didn't seem right.

Jealous much?

So, they complain about him.

I get it.

When I am sad-mad about not feeling good enough, or popular enough, or successful enough,

I want someone else to blame.

To me, this story seems familiar.

“The church is in decline,” they say. “No one wants religion anymore,” they say.

And then the one rogue teacher who goes against all those rules and regulations that seem to make the church the church speaks in truth and love, and OUTSIDE the church, people start to listen.

That popular preacher who has thousands of podcast listeners, let's make him look bad.

That loud and foul-mouthed preacher who owns the speaker circuit, let's make her the scapegoat.

THOSE PEOPLE he hangs out with. They are sinners. And he EATS with them.

THOSE PEOPLE she hangs out with. They would rob you blind. And she invites them to dinner.

We have the right faith, don't we?

They, those big, big crowds of lots of people, have it all wrong.

Oh, I can justify a lot. Especially when I am feeling hurt.

But I also know how religion in its most institutional forms can so easily calcify at its roots and no longer give life.

We need the life-bringers, the truth-tellers, the love-sharers.

We need the ones who are deeply wise in those ancient understandings.

And yet, just cocky enough to bend the rules and offer the warmest of welcomes to the weirdos who aren't typically the church-going types.

We need those teachers who will help us to really know and experience the love of God for ourselves – whether that's in a huge crowd or a quiet room.

Now, what I want to remember about this text as we move into the parable part is that Jesus didn't hate the scribes and Pharisees.

He held compassion for them, and deep love for the teaching of the law that was their gift to him.

They were his mentors, his teachers, his friends.

AND he loved them enough to call them out for getting hung up on the wrong things.

I love this because we can get caught up on the same wrong things.

We want to reach more people, benefit from more popularity, garner more respect and be that church that saves the world.

Well, maybe YOU don't have those ambitions.

But we clergy-types can easily suffer from those ambitions as the institutional, money-making, denominational church wants us to want those things because it keeps them funded, and respected, and influential.

So just for a moment, I'm going to be that pastor who doesn't mind her mouth and tell you what's going on in these parables the only way I can truly express it,

Jesus hears the "constructive criticism" he is being offered, and calls it for the crap that it is.

How does he do that exactly?

He tells them THREE TIMES. THREE TIMES, that it's the one who is lost and then found who matters.

This has absolutely nothing to do with the crowds of people who want to buy him coffee and have him over to their house for dinner. This has absolutely nothing to do with multitude of people who want to show off their ticket stubs from the “Jesus-show.” Jesus gained the reputation for ordering a beer with lunch and never skipping any seconds he was offered at the table, and they were jealous of how many people seemed to be listening to him. “This fellow eats with hordes of tax-collectors and sinners.” That’s the worst they can say about him! So what?

Well, in the lectionary, we institutional pastors are encouraged to break up this text and focus on the parable, the one parable, of the prodigal son.

And trust me, there’s a lot we can mine from that particular story.

But I wonder if we are missing another very important point when we don’t read them altogether.

We miss the point that ANY time the one that was lost, the one sheep, the one coin, the one son, gets found, now that is a reason for celebration.

Um, the membership numbers don’t matter.

The crowds aren’t the point.

Really? That may come as news to us. It may even be a shock.

In our consumer culture, the numbers ALWAYS matter.

At least that’s how I read our world.

*How big IS your church?*

– Why is that always the first question I’m asked when people hear that I’m a pastor?

Maybe if we really understood what Jesus was doing, instead we would ask of clergy or of congregations,

*What have you celebrated lately?*

Here's what Jesus is trying to teach those who taught him -

Remember that crowds are fickle.

These tax collectors and sinners who are here today will just as likely disappear tomorrow.

What they find popular will come and go.

The crowd that LOVES Jesus on any given day may be just as happy to shout "crucify him" on the next.

The Pharisees and Scribes miss the point if they think it's at all a popularity contest about who has the best or most correct message.

Religion is not the competition we make it out to be!

Rather, the rejoicing in heaven that Jesus is talking about is ALWAYS about the ONE.

It isn't how many people show up to church that matters.

It's about the ONE who has been changed by the love of God –

whenever and wherever it happens to show up.

But that's not how we are taught to think.

And that's certainly not what we are taught to celebrate.

Again. THREE TIMES, that magic number that is supposed to help us remember,

Jesus tells us that when the one lost is now found -

There will be a celebration, a party, joy, rejoicing, laughter, hugs, and tears streaming down your face because of how happy this day has just become.

We may get it if we are a shepherd and know the pleasure of finding the sheep who strayed from the herd.

We may get it if we are the keeper of the household finances and hear a story about the day's wages that got lost behind the couch cushions turn up again.

But we better darn well get it when we hear the story of the son who left home, and family, and values behind for a life of pursuing empty pleasures who wakes up and returns head hung low, only to find himself welcome back with open arms. A cause for celebration? You bet it is!

And the story of the older brother is told to amplify the point.

You can grumble all you want about the one who has dinner with a sinner.

But in heaven, for the one who has found their way home, there will always be a party,

Like it or not.

God isn't counting the numbers.

God has absolutely zero interest in our shame.

God's greatest desire is to celebrate our return.

And by that, I mean that God celebrates your return.

God celebrates my return.

And this is the absolute scandal of this parable.

It's about the ONE.

The ONE is important to God.

And we can be all too quick to dismiss the sake of the one for the promise of the many.

That's now on us – having heard these parables.

My friends, I'll ask the question, and try to incorporate it now into my everyday vocabulary when I meet pastors or church-goers and want to know about their communities.

*What have you celebrated lately?*

What was lost to you, but now has been found?

Did you honor that blessing with a party? Pull out the nice dishes? Buy the good steaks and open a bottle of wine?

Instead of blaming and shaming, Jesus offers wholeness,

Even to those who were quick to start rumors about the company he kept.

It's time we honored such wholeness and forgiveness for ourselves and others.

I'll end with a story that writer Glennon Doyle wrote on her Facebook page this week,

Because as another one of those salty, gospel-loving women, she has a way with words:

Glennon writes:

*Loves. Yesterday a friend was hurting about some mistakes she made. She knows me well and trusts me so she said this - "You know I love you. But I mean....you've screwed up more than I ever have. How the hell do you let that go so well?"*

*How great is that??????*

*I said something like: "I think that my secret is that I forgive myself relentlessly. Just relentlessly. It annoys people how freely and relentlessly I forgive myself." The truth is that I just don't understand living any other way. Shame is so... self indulgent and power zapping. It leaves us useless. To ourselves, to our people, to the world. Self flagellation is not a badge of honor. It doesn't make us worthy It just makes us - kind of a drag. And It takes us out of the game. Who has time?*

*What are we doing here, if not learning and growing and trying again? Why can't we do that with some lightness and tenderness and humor?*

*Who we were last year, last hour, last minute- it's gone. We are new! Let us begin again!*

*Okay that's all.*

Forgive yourself. Forgive others.

And that's where the internal story comes through in the parable of the two brothers.

No matter how messed up you are – from having lived a little too hard on the wild side,

Or having lived too little on the safe side.

Let it go. It's gone. We are new. Let's begin again.

And please, please, please celebrate any and every chance you get to honor a homecoming. Amen.