

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS
(6) JESUS AND THE LOST

Luke 15

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SCRIPTURE

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“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? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And 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.’ ⁷Just 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.

⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When 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.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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’” (Luke 15 NRSV).

MESSAGE

One of the best known and best loved chapters in the Bible is the fifteenth chapter of Luke. It is often called the “Gospel within a Gospel.” It captures the essence of the Gospel or “good news” that Jesus came to earth to bring to us.

This chapter contains three similar stories all unique to Luke’s Gospel. These stories are told by Jesus in response to the criticism, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (15:2). The term “sinners” was used by the Pharisees to refer to ordinary people who did not keep all the minutia of religious rules and regulations. The Pharisees had a general classification for such people. They were called the “People of the Land” (Hebrew *am ha'aretz*) – and it was not a compliment. The People of the Land were regarded as ignorant, untrustworthy, and unsafe. The Pharisees avoided them whenever possible. They were forbidden by their own regulations to be a guest of or have as one of their guests someone who belonged to the People of the Land. Consequently they were quite shocked to see Jesus associating with such people.

In response Jesus tells three stories. The first is the story of the lost sheep. The second is the story of the lost coin. The third is the story of the lost or prodigal son. Each story involves something of value being lost and then found: a sheep, a coin, a person. In each case, that which is lost represents people who have lost their way in life, who are far from God. The lessons are clear. People who are far from God matter to God and they need to matter to us. And when people who are far from God are found by God it means it's time to celebrate.

Jesus tells them about a lost sheep and a shepherd's joy. Being a shepherd in ancient Judea was hard and dangerous work. Pasture land was scarce and the surrounding geography often treacherous. Shepherds had to be constantly on the look out for any sheep that might wander off.

Many flocks were not owned by individuals but were held in common by an entire village. There were usually two or three shepherds in charge. One could picture two of them returning home safely with most of the flock and announcing to the people that the third shepherd was out looking for a stray. This would put the entire village on alert. Then at some point they would see the shepherd in the distance with the lost sheep across his shoulders and shouts of grateful joy would arise from the community.

Jesus tells this story to give us a picture of what God is like. Just as a shepherd rejoices when a lost sheep is found so too God rejoices when a lost soul has been found. In Jesus' day there were religious types who were quick to write off "tax-collectors and sinners." But Jesus makes it clear that God does not write them off. Of course, God loves those who do not wander away but his heart knows unsurpassed joy when a lost one is found and returns home.

While the term "lost" may have a negative connotation today, in the original stories no such pejorative meaning was intended. Of course, it is important that we get away from the idea of judging people. We do not know who is saved and who is not saved. From time-to-time I have met people who have acted like they have had this knowledge but I am sure they did not. I am reminded of the words of Mark Twain who said, "having spent considerable time with good people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax-collectors and sinners."

The Scriptures make it clear that only God knows our individual destinies (Mt 7 *et al*). Furthermore, it is God himself who does the saving (2 Cor 1:21-22; Titus 3:4-7) and he can be trusted to be completely just in whatever he does (Gen 18:25). We are then free to talk in a loving and non-anxious way to anyone about what the Savior has done for us.

The second story that Jesus tells is the story of the lost coin. It contains a great deal of misdirection. Misdirection is when you expect something to go one way but then it surprises you and goes another way. The original version of the nursery rhyme “Hickory, dickory, dock” goes like this:

Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down!
Hickory, dickory, dock.

The misdirected version goes like this:

Hickory, dickory, dock,
Three mice ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The other two got away without injury.

Jesus was fond of misdirection. There was a popular story in his day called “The Story of the Lost Coin.” Rabbis told and retold this story. The disciples of Jesus would have been familiar with this story. One day Jesus decides to tell this story but he makes some changes that yield surprises and these surprises taught them and now teach us something about what God is really up to in our world.

In the original story that the rabbis told it was a man searching for a lost coin. But when Jesus tells his version it is a woman searching for a lost coin. Jesus’ view of women is in sharp contrast to many of his contemporaries. He treated women with dignity and respect. He saw men and women as persons made in the image of God. He enlisted women as partners in his ministry. Question: How did Jesus and his disciples support themselves as they went from village to village? Jesus was no longer in a carpenter’s shop. The fishermen were no longer fishing. The tax collector was no longer collecting taxes. The real answer may surprise you and is found in Luke 8 (Lk 8:1-3). Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna; and many other women provided for them out of their own means. The women financed the ministry.

From the very beginning of the Christian Church men and women came together to pray and worship. The Apostle Paul was at one time a strict Pharisee but after he came to know the Lord Jesus he wrote in his letter to the Galatians:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no

longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28 NRSV).

The coin in this parable of the lost coin was a silver drachma that would have had a modest value. From a monetary point of view it is hard to imagine someone going after such a coin. But there may have been an altogether different reason for the search. Jesus specifically mentions 10 silver coins. In those days the mark of a married woman was a head-dress made of ten silver coins linked together by a chain. This head-dress was her permanent possession and could not be taken away from her for any legal reason. Apparently the chain broke and one of the coins was lost. So what we have here is a woman searching for the equivalent of a wedding ring. It is important for us to understand that the motivation for this search was not the pocketbook but the heart.

The rabbis, in their version of the story, said, "As a man searches diligently for a lost coin, how much more should he keep the Law." So for them the coin represented the Law. But here comes a surprise. In Jesus' story the coin represents someone who has broken the Law and is now lost. And the woman represents God looking for that which is lost! The clear implication of the story is that searching for people who have lost their way needs to be a priority. People matter to God not because of their material worth but because they are objects of his love. People who are far from God matter to God. And if people who are far from God matter to God then they need to matter to us.

The woman in the story lit a lamp. This was because houses in those days were dark, with at most one small window. Many had dirt floors often covered by rushes and reeds. Looking for a coin on a floor like that would have been like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Some homes had rough stone floors with many crevices between the stones. In fact, coins and fragments of pottery fell so often into these crevices that archaeologists use the coins they find in those crevices to date when people lived in the homes. In any case, by sweeping with a broom the woman may have hoped to catch a glimmer of the coin in the light or hear the coin rattle against the floor so she could retrieve it. And she did retrieve it! And she rejoiced, as did her friends and neighbors. Considering the neighborly feelings in a small village, this is quite understandable.

But in order to understand what Jesus says next you need to understand this. In those days the popular superstition said that angels were jealous of human beings and even inflicted malevolent harm on people from time-to-time. Jesus swept the popular notion aside. He says:

"Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

Angels do not despise humans. Just the opposite. They rejoice when even one person turns back to God. Now it is important for every Christian to understand that the day you came to faith, heaven threw a party just for you.

The third story Jesus tells is quite well known. But the story of the prodigal son is not an allegory. In an allegory, every part of the story is meant to represent something else, to convey some important truth. But the story of the prodigal son is what we call a parable. A parable paints a picture in the mind, out of ordinary happenstance, that leaves the listener with a single idea or theme. In this case, the idea is that God is incredible gracious and does, in fact, welcome sinners.

For the third story, Jesus tells about a man with two sons. The younger son demands that his father give him his inheritance ahead of time, that is, before the father has died. This would have been one third of the estate (see Deut 21:7). The father acquiesces to the son's request. The young man then takes his inheritance and runs away to spend it all on wild living. When the money runs out, a severe famine hits the country and the son finds himself in dire circumstances. He is so desperate that he takes a job feeding pigs. For a Jew, to tend to pigs would have been extremely humiliating since they were regarded as unclean according to the Old Testament dietary laws.

The young man finally comes to his senses as he thinks about his father's servants who were at least fed well and had shelter at night. He recognizes his foolishness and decides to return to his father and ask for forgiveness. The father who has been watching and waiting, receives his son back with open arms. Immediately the father turns to his servants and asks them to prepare an enormous feast in celebration of his son's return, to the chagrin of the older brother.

I want us to focus on four things that the father in the story says to or about his children that will help us better appreciate what is being taught here. The father says about his younger son, "He was dead." That is quite a serious diagnosis! Notice that the father does not say, "my son has been going through a difficult phase" or "we have some issues we need to work on." No. He says, "He was dead."

Of course, the son did not literally die. But he had cut himself off from his family and we can only imagine the kind of grief the father felt. It must have been a feeling of great loss not unlike a death.

The father's macabre expression about his son does underscore the first step in learning to forgive. We need to recognize the hurt that has been done to us. Denying our experience prevents us from moving forward.

The second thing that the father says about his younger son is, “He was lost.” He was not only lost from God but he was also lost from himself. He did not understand himself. He was missing direction in his life. He had lost his identity and was searching for a new one in all the wrong places.

This second comment from the father is more empathetic. It is an attempt to understand why the younger son behaved the way he did. This leads us to our second step in learning to forgive.

After we recognize that we have been hurt, it is helpful to try to understand why the person did it. We need to (metaphorically) step back and try to see the situation from their perspective. I remember visiting a family some years ago. We were in the backyard enjoying the beautiful summer weather. At one point an older man, who was visiting them, threw a ball at me at great speed from a short distance and I got hurt. At first I was quite upset. Only much later did I discover the man had a serious illness that caused intense pain. He had not meant to throw the ball so hard. Once I understood the situation it was easier to give up the resentment.

Sometimes it is not possible to know the other person’s circumstances or understand why they did what they did. When that is the case, Christ followers have both an advantage and an obligation. The advantage is, even if we do not know why the other person did what they did, God does. God understands all about that other person and understands all about us.

We also know that in the history of forgiveness, God went first. God is the first forgiver. He paved the way. He is our model and inspiration. We learn to forgive by following his example and relying upon the presence and power of his Holy Spirit.

The obligation is that we look at people the way God looks at people. All people matter to God and they need to matter to us. By looking at people from God’s perspective, it becomes easier to forgive.

The third thing the father says is, “Let’s celebrate.” The father’s forgiveness of his son was not a feeling he kept hidden in his heart. It was a decision that he made known to others.

By telling a third party that you have forgiven someone, you add power to the decision. Because at least one other person knows you have forgiven, it becomes a lot harder to take it back.

Reconciliation does not always follow forgiveness but in this parable it does. The father gives three gifts to his younger son to show others how they are to treat him: a robe for honor, a ring for respect, but most importantly sandals because only family members were allowed to wear shoes in the house.

The fourth thing that the father says is not directed to the younger son but to the older one. The older brother is not happy his younger brother has returned. He becomes angry and refuses to go to the feast. He focuses on his brother's past sins, even some he may not have committed, and refuses to forgive him as his father has. He tries to distance himself by saying to his father, "But when this son of *yours* came back..." (15:30). But the father pleads with him saying:

"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 (15:32).

Notice how gently the father refutes the older brother's attempt to disconnect himself from his younger brother. The older brother says, "This son of *yours*" but the father says, "This brother of *yours*." I am reminded of Paul's words to a conflicted congregation in Corinth:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21 NRSV).

The truth is, we really do need each other.

The parable of the prodigal son was originally told by Jesus to reprove the religious people of his day for their uncaring and unforgiving attitude toward others, especially those they considered to be "not as good as they were." The message that they were intended to receive from the parable was that they were acting like the older brother.

Two thousand years later not much has changed. People who sit in pews and stand behind pulpits still act like the older brother. We need to understand that some prodigals never leave home. Our bodies may be present but our hearts have wandered away. So if we want to develop a more caring and forgiving spirit, we need to beware of the other prodigal brooding inside of us. We need to come to our senses and say to God, "Father, thank you for forgiving *me*. I was dead but now I am alive. I was lost but now I am found."