

## **2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Luke 15:1-3 and 11-32**

I have often thought that this is probably the best known parable of Jesus, and if it's not this one, then it's the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Those are two pretty good parables to know. Both are good stories and both capture vital aspects of the gospel message. This one tells us something vital about our relationship with God, and the Good Samaritan tells us something vital about our relationships with each other.

This parable touches on a lot of common themes in life. There is youthful rebellion, the lure of the new and exciting that often doesn't really measure up when you get there, feelings of alienation when we know that we have screwed up, and there is the nostalgia for the comfortable and familiar.

The story is prompted by the attitudes of the Scribes and Pharisees. They have a sense of moral and spiritual superiority. They look down on the people Jesus associates with, like tax collectors and prostitutes. These folks are the worst of the worst, in their minds: Terrible sinners against God, traitors to their own people.

But that's not how Jesus sees them. Jesus sees them as they are. They are made in the image of God, like all human beings. As such, they have sacred worth and loved by God.

How do we regard the worst of the worst? Last fall we saw the trial of Ghislaine Maxwell, associate of Jeffrey Epstein, was a notorious child sex trafficker. I'll leave the question of his murder/suicide to someone else. But she was part of what he was doing, and a lot of people would view her as the worst of the worst. And I saw plenty of self-righteous outrage aimed in her direction.

Some people just might not want to accept this, but she is made in the image of God. God loves her. Jesus died for her. God wants her to come back into relationship with him and he would forgive her sins. What if she set foot in a church? What would happen? Would she be welcomed as a lost sinner coming home? I have my doubts.

How many notorious sinners are there in our churches? How many people with terrible things in their past who have found forgiveness in the arms of Christ? I'm afraid the answer is not enough. And at least in some cases, I'm sure the answer is because of the attitude they encountered from self-righteous, Pharisaical Christians.

Jesus responds to their attitude with three parables about lost things. This is the third, the parable of the lost son, some call it.

A father has two sons. The younger son wants him to divide his estate while he is still alive. Sometimes men would do that and hand things over to their sons and "retire." But for

the son to ask for it was kind of like him saying, "I wish you were already dead." Nonetheless, he agrees to it.

The younger son takes his share, which would be one-third in Hebrew tradition, and leaves. He's not allowed to do that. It still belongs to his father while he's alive. But the father lets him go. God has given us freedom. Even if he knows that we will abuse it, he still values our freedom enough to give it to us.

The son goes off to a foreign land. The grass is always greener on the other side, he thinks. Until it isn't. We don't know much about this younger son, but many have supposed that since he is unmarried, that likely means he is still a teenager. Most Jewish men married by 20. No doubt he lacks experience at managing money and he ends up in a desperate situation.

Finally, he "comes to himself." That's a literal reading of verse 17, and I think it's significant. We are not truly ourselves as long as we are living in rebellion against God. We find our true identity in relationship to our Creator and Heavenly Father.

He remembers the goodness of his father. And he hopes to be taken back as a hired hand. In a first century Jewish home, a hired hand was the low man on the totem pole. We might think it's better than being a slave, but that's our understanding. A slave was a member of the household. If things were bad, the slave still had food on the table and a roof over his head every day. The hired man would be let go.

The Pharisees would probably think he was audacious even for wanting this. They would say that such a son should never be allowed to come home, under any circumstances. And in saying that, they misunderstand the character of God.

The father is looking for his return. That is a picture of God. God wants us to come home to him. But we have to choose that. God may work to "draw us back" to him. We Christians in the Wesleyan tradition understand that there is "prevenient grace," the grace of God that calls us back to relationship with him, long before we know Christ. But in any case, we must choose to return to God. We have free will. We are not like the lost coin or the lost sheep in Jesus' two other parables. We must return to him of our own volition.

He is welcomed back as a son. He is given the finest robe, which would be the father's own robe, a sign of honor. He is given a ring. This would be a family signet ring. And he is given sandals. Slaves generally did not wear shoes in that culture. He is restored to sonship. God restores us to our place as children when we come home to him. There are no slaves or hired hands in the Kingdom of God, only children of God.

"My son was dead but he has come back to life." Apart from God, we are dead. Repentance is coming back to life.

But the older son is not happy about this turn of events. He represents the Pharisaical attitude. He refuses to go in. It is unjust in his mind. A son who turns his back on the father should never be allowed to be a son again. A sinner who rebels against God should never be a child of God again.

His father goes out to him. "All I have is yours." That was true. The younger son received his inheritance and wasted it. The older son has nothing to lose by going in and receiving his brother back from the dead. "We must celebrate when the dead come back to life." Did he go in? We don't know. It's up to us to choose how we would respond in this situation.

Many call this the Parable of the Lost Son. But the old name for it was the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I think a better name would be the Parable of the Prodigal Family. Each member is "prodigal" in a different way. The word prodigal can mean "wasteful," but it can also be used in a positive way, meaning "extravagant." The younger son is wasteful in an obvious way, with the riches he received from his father. The older son is wasteful in a different way. He is wasteful of the time he has with his father, to learn the heart and mind of his father. And the father is prodigal in the sense of extravagant. He is extravagantly generous in his mercy.

The story pairs well with the text from 2 Corinthians. We shouldn't evaluate people by worldly standards. The world calls some people "no good, worthless." We shouldn't view anyone that way because God doesn't.

"And if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation." We shouldn't judge others by their past. That was the older son's mistake. He couldn't see penitence. He could only see his brother's past sins.

But we are children of a God in the business of forgiveness and reconciliation. And we must be in the same business, the ministry of reconciliation. We can't hold people's past sins against them. That is contrary to the very nature of the gospel.

And we need to be honest and say, sometimes we don't do the best job of that. Sometimes we are that older brothers, standing outside, saying to God, "THAT person gets to be part of the Church! I know what they have done! That's not fair!"

No, it's not fair. The Kingdom of God is not about fairness. It's about grace. Thank goodness it is, or none of us would have a part in it!