



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity St. Luke 15:11-32 Fr. William Klock

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Today's parable of the prodigal son is a familiar one. We've all heard plenty of sermons on the story. Some of us have preached plenty of sermons on it—although it's interesting that it isn't part of the historic lectionary we use on Sundays. The folks who revised the American Prayer Book in 1928 included it to replace the traditional reading of the parable of the unjust steward, probably because they thought the parable of the prodigal son was more positive. It's certainly more familiar. And yet we've become so familiar with this parable that I think we often fail to really listen to it. We tend to forget or to ignore the context. Most often we think of this parable as teaching our doctrine of salvation by grace. The young prodigal rebels, but eventually returns to his father and learns that salvation is not by works, but by grace. Then, as often as not, we leave out the part of the parable about the older brother, which doesn't quite fit and throws a wrench in the grace versus works narrative. If we do include that last bit, we then ask: "Who am I? Am I the younger brother who received the grace of the father or the older brother confident in his works?"

Now, our doctrine of salvation by grace is important. It's wonderfully true. But this is not about that. You might remember that not very long ago, on the Third Sunday after Trinity, our Gospel lesson included two parables, one about a lost sheep and the other about a lost coin. This story of the lost son is the third in that triad.

And if we remember back six weeks ago we'll remember that this series of parables was introduced by St. Luke this way. He wrote:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2)

Notice, Jesus didn't tell the parable in response to someone asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" A rich young ruler who had been faithful in keeping the law once ask that of Jesus and, interestingly, Jesus didn't condemn him for his works. Instead, he told him to go even further—sell everything you have and give it to the poor. That's a sermon for another time. Today we need to grapple with the parable we've been given and we need to do that in its context—which is the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees over the fact that Jesus was welcoming sinners.

So Jesus responds to their outrage with three stories. In the first a shepherd loses one of his one hundred sheep. He secures the ninety-nine in the fold and sets off into the night to find the lost one. When he finds that lost sheep, he carries it home on his shoulders, and rejoices with the other shepherds. What was precious had been lost, but was now found. In the second story Jesus tells of a poor old woman who loses one of ten silver coins, probably her dowry. She can't find it anywhere. The story is very short, but we nevertheless get a vivid sense of how frantic she was as she searched. Eventually she sweeps the whole house and finds the lost coin. In her great joy she runs to tell her friends so that they can rejoice with her.

And Jesus likens the joy of the shepherd who found the lost sheep and the joy of the woman who found the lost coin to the joy in heaven when a lost sinner repents—a joy that stands

in stark contrast to the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees.

Notice something important about these stories. The shepherd owns the sheep. The woman owns the coin. The problem is that they were lost. And just so with the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the sinners in Israel. They were part of the people of God. They were his children—and brothers and sisters of the scribes and Pharisees. They belonged to God. but they were lost, and so he sent his son to seek them out, to find them, and to restore them. The problem isn't with the righteous—with the Jews who kept the law—although Jesus has things to say to them in other places and at other times. No, they were faithful to those things that marked them out as God's people: circumcision, sabbath, diet, and all those other things. Unlike the "sinners", they didn't need to repent. What they needed was a heart for their lost brothers and sisters. Judgement was coming. It was a judgement they'd been praying and longing for, but instead of longing to see their lost brothers and sisters repentant and restored, they seemed to be looking forward to their judgement. They saw Jesus showing mercy to sinners and instead of rejoicing, they grumbled that Jesus wasn't giving these folks their comeuppance. And that revealed a problem on the part of the righteous. They were *doing* everything right, but their *hearts* were, in at least this very important way, in the wrong place. In Jesus the Lord was fulfilling his promises to his people, promises of forgiveness, restoration, and new life. Think of Mary's song, the one we call *Magnificat*, where she sings about the Messiah and glorifies God, know he was about to do what he promised: Bring down the strong and raise up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich empty away.

**He remembering his mercy hath
holpen his servant Israel.**

**As he promised to our
forefathers, Abraham and his seed
forever.**

Sinners needed the mercy the Lord had brought through Jesus to take part in those fulfilled promises. But the scribes and Pharisees and those like them also needed something if they were to participate in this new thing the Lord was doing. They needed to recognise that mercy for what it was and rejoice.

And so this third parable in the series takes things a step further than the lost sheep and the lost coin. It's less abstract. Now Jesus puts both the sinners with all their ugliness and the Pharisees with all their righteousness unmistakably into the story.

Jesus presents the younger brother as a truly despicable character. He demands his share of the inheritance from his father. Now, a father could give his property to a son while he was still alive, but this didn't mean the son could do whatever he pleased with it. Ordinarily the son wouldn't have the right to sell the property until his father died and until he died, the father would have the rights to everything the land produced. But this brat demands more than that. He wants money to go off on his own, so he's not just demanding his father give him the right of possession, but the right of disposal so that he can sell the property and run off with the proceeds. It's wrong in all sorts of ways. In selling the property, he's depriving his father of the living that was rightly his. The other thing that people today easily miss is the issue of this boy leaving his family. We up and move across the country, leaving parents and family behind and we do it pretty regularly in our culture, but such a thing was virtually unheard of in Jesus' world. Family was everything and to abandon it this way was impiety. Not only that, but to go to a far country meant leaving Israel to go and live amongst unclean gentiles. I'm not sure we have an equivalent offense today other than for a child to abandon the covenant family of the Church. So Jesus paints this boy in

the worst possible light. When Jesus says that the boy squandered his money and ended up feeding pigs just to have a place to sleep and that to eat he had to steal the pig food, as much as this would foster even more disgust for the boy, most people would have thought, "Serves him right!" The pig sty is a metaphor for the boy's reprobation. He rejected his family, he rejected his people, he rejected his God, and he ends up in a place of abject ritual uncleanness in a foreign land. He rejected God and now God has rejected him.

But then, having hit rock-bottom, this impious lout of a son decides to go back to his father. Now, he knows that he has no rights. He knows what he's done and that his only chance is to beg. And nothing will be the same. The best he can hope for is to be a hired hand, not a son. And so he rehearses his spiel all the way home. But to his surprise, his father, having seen him from a distance, comes running down the road to him, sandals flapping and robe billowing out behind him. What Jesus describes is a horribly undignified thing for a father in Israel. But this father loved his lost son, in spite of everything he had done, and when he saw his repentant son at a distance, out of love, he ran to welcome him home. He didn't wait for his son to come to him, but threw propriety to the wind and ran to meet him. Not only that, but he called for shoes and robe, put a ring on his finger—Jesus brings to mind the exaltation of Joseph in Egypt—and he calls for a feast to celebrate the return of his son. To kill the fattened calf was a big deal in a society where animals were kept more for what they produced than for their meat.

At this point I expect the point of the parable was sinking in on the Pharisees as Jesus was digging deeper with each of his stories. Sheep are stupid and if one gets lost, you can't really blame the sheep for it. Coins have no will of their own. If the

woman lost a coin, it was her own fault. In those cases it was simply the rejoicing over what was lost that Jesus wanted to highlight. Even the Pharisees rejoiced to find things they'd lost. But in the third story Jesus gives them a not-so-subtle picture of Israel. The father, like God, loves his sons and there were many sons and daughters in Israel who were "lost"—people like the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and other "sinners". Like the prodigal son, they had rejected their father and abandoned his covenant. And while there were many in Israel who were faithful to the Lord and to his covenant and thought divine judgement was likely the best thing that could happen to such impious louts, the fact is that Israel belonged to God. The lost were his sons and daughters as much as the scribes and Pharisees were. The Lord had a claim on them all, those who knew their place and those who were lost. And so, like the shepherd, like the old woman, and like the father, he rejoiced when what was lost to him was recovered. I can't help but think that Jesus must have had in mind, too, the great cost at which the Lord was recovering his lost people: humbling himself and taking on their flesh and soon to be giving his life in payment for their sins. This is what the scribes and Pharisees needed to understand.

So Jesus continues. This last bit that we often leave out when we tell the parable is where the point actually lies. Jesus started out telling us that a man had two sons, but so far we've only heard anything about the younger. Now Jesus gets to the older of the two. He's a good son. While the father is welcoming home the prodigal, the older brother is hard at work in the fields—or what's left of them after the younger son liquidated his share. He asks one of the slaves what all the festivities are about and is told how his brother has returned and how their father has welcomed him. Instead of rejoicing, he becomes angry. He refuses to join the party.

Eventually his father comes out to him, not only welcoming him into the party as well, but even pleading with him when he refuses. If the older brother had had any sense, it would have been natural for him to join the party in the first place and to rejoice over his brother, but something's gone wrong with him. Even as his father pleads with him—and here we see Jesus telling these stories to the scribes and Pharisees—even as he pleads with him, the elder brother only gets angrier—to the point where he finally rebukes his father. “I’ve spent my whole life working for you! I’ve worked like a slave! I’ve been faithful! I’ve done everything you ever asked of me! And where was the celebration? And now this no-good son of yours”—notice he won’t own him as his own brother—“this no-good son of yours, this impious lout who rejected you and our family and our God and spent what you worked so hard for on parties and prostitutes, he comes home and you throw a party for him? What are you thinking, Dad?”

Now, I’m sure, the scribes and Pharisees clearly saw Jesus’ point. Here they were, angry with him that he welcomed tax collectors and sinners—their wayward brothers whom they’d rather see under God’s judgement than restored to the household of Israel. And to make it even clearer Jesus continues, telling them how the father responded: “My son, you’ve always been with me. What is mine is yours.” The scribes and Pharisees understood the covenant. They understood duty and obedience. They loved the Lord. But now they needed to grasp what the Lord was doing through Jesus as he finally fulfilled his promises to his people. “Celebrate and rejoice,” says the father to his faithful son, “because this brother of yours”—yes he’s your *brother!*—“he was dead, but is now alive.” The words the father speaks recall an image that had been with Israel since the time of the prophets

and one that was particularly meaningful to the Pharisees. Think back to Ezekiel and to his vision of the valley of dry bones. Those dry bones represented Israel. She had forsaken the covenant and the Lord had disciplined her by sending her into exile. But the Lord promised that one day his word would come and restore his wayward and faithless people to life. What was dead would be made alive again. And not just in some figurative sense. One of the central doctrines of the Pharisees was the dearly held belief that one day the Lord would literally raise the dead of Israel to life in his presence. One day he would set everything to rights, beginning with his people.

And by way of the parable, Jesus is now saying to the Pharisees that he’s the one who’s come to do it. But he hasn’t just come to reward them with the life of the age to come, he’s come to offer that life even to the prodigals of Israel. Prostitute and Pharisees, both are part of the people of God, both are the Lord’s children, both belong equally to him. The Lord had rescued the ancestors of the prostitute from Egypt just as he’d rescued the ancestors of the Pharisees. He desires life for the prostitute just as much as he does for the Pharisees. That’s what they need to wrap their heads around, because if they don’t, despite all their faithfulness to the Lord, they will not have a place in the age to come if they aren’t willing to submit themselves to the Messiah.

You see, judgement was coming for Israel, but not quite like the Pharisees thought. They thought that in the end, the Lord would recognise his people by their faithfulness to the law—to circumcision and sabbath and diet. That meant the tax collectors and sinners were out. But the fact was—and this is the point of Jesus’ parables—that when judgement came on Jerusalem and on Judah, what would mark out the people of God was not faithfulness to the law, but

faithfulness to Jesus the Messiah. Jesus had taken on Israel’s identity, he had picked up her failed mission, he died the death that she deserved, and when he rose from the grave and sent God’s Spirit, he formed a new family, a new covenant people not centred this time on law, but on himself. As St. John wrote, “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). And, Brothers and Sisters, at the heart of Jesus’ ministry was mercy—and God the Father rejoiced in heaven to see that mercy at work amongst his people, and especially as what was lost to him was restored by it.

So the story doesn’t easily apply directly to us because we’re not Pharisees, but it does have something to say to us. Brothers and Sisters, this is a story about the love, grace, and mercy of God. Reading the parable in context reminds us of the faithfulness of God revealed in Jesus as he fulfils his promises to his people. And it was that faithfulness, revealed in Jesus and proclaimed by those first Jewish believers, that brought the first gentiles into the Church. And that, itself, was a fulfilment of the Lord’s promises. This new people of God, this new Israel centred on faith in Jesus, brought the nations to the Lord, to the God of Israel, in awe, in reverence, and in faith. That membership in this new family was based not on law but on faith in Jesus made it possible for the nations—for you and I—to become children of God and fellow heirs with the natural brothers and sisters of Jesus. And this opens that category of “the lost” to encompass an entire world. In the parable Jesus was talking about the lost of Israel, but through Jesus the sort of restoration that the Lord sought with the lost of Israel has been opened to all of humanity—to the sheep not of Israel’s fold. You and I ought to see the lost of our own world, people

created to bear the image of God, but lost to him because of their sin, you and I ought to see those people and desire for them the same mercy and restoration that God has shown to us through Jesus. We ought not only to rejoice when we see that mercy at work, the joy of our own experience of God's mercy ought to be sending us out to the lost. But all too often we become blasé about what God has done for us. We lose the joy we once found in our salvation. Or, for those of us who have never known life apart from God's covenantal mercy—like so many in Israel—we take his mercy for granted. Brothers and Sisters, take time to think on what the Lord has done for us in Jesus and rejoice. Make a point of it. As you read scripture. When you come to the Lord's Table. Make a point of it. Rejoice at the mercy of God.

And, I think, if we do that, we will avoid the stance of the Pharisees who had forgotten the nature of God's mercy, who chafed at Jesus offering the mercy of God to sinners while they worked so hard to be faithful. We're prone to something very similar. We forget the mercy of God. We forget his forgiveness. We forget that as much as God is pleased with us when we are faithful and pleased with our good works, we too are only part of this family because of his mercy and his forgiveness. And then we start looking at the lost, not as people to be found, but as people who deserve their comeuppance, who need God's judgement rather than his mercy. And, in that, we forget what the kingdom of God is all about.

Brothers and Sisters, think on the mercy of God and rejoice. Come to his Table this morning and be reminded that he sent his Son at great cost to seek out the lost and to restore them to the fold. Here we see the faithfulness of God, a witness that has now brought you and I who were not even of that flock. A witness that has brought us in awe and wonder and in

faith to Jesus the Messiah—a faith by which the Father has welcomed us, too, into the sheepfold. Rejoice in the mercies of God and carry that rejoicing to the lost that they, like us, might see and know themselves the mercies of God at work in Jesus.

Let us pray: Grant us, Lord, we pray, to know your mercy and never to take your salvation for granted. Make us faithful stewards of your mercies that we might rejoice as you do at the restoration of the lost; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*