

## **The Parable of the ... ?** (Lent 4)

### **Prayer of Illumination**

Present God,  
Settle our hearts.  
Still our minds.  
And stir our imaginations,  
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### **Luke 15:11-32**

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 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. 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. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' 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. 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.' 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.'"

The Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

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## The Parable of the ... ?

Did you know that in the oldest biblical manuscripts there are no titles? No chapters or verses either—all of that was added to the text later to help our ability to read and study the text. In the earliest Greek New Testament manuscripts, everything was written entirely in capital letters with no spaces between words and little to no punctuation. Writing or copying a manuscript was both expensive and labor-intensive, so efforts were made to conserve space wherever possible.

That's your first piece of cocktail trivia for this morning. Here's your second: did you know that the word 'prodigal' is nowhere to be found in the story we often refer to as 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son'? It's not anywhere in the text. And, according to scholars, it's not until the 4th century that the word is even associated with the story.

Interestingly, while almost all English translations of the New Testament title the story 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son', it isn't a universal title. Lebanese Christians refer to the story as 'The Clever Son', a title that plays on the Arabic word for clever, which can also mean divide or separate. While in Germany and Egypt, the story is referred to as 'The Parable of the Lost Son', though which of the sons is lost remains unclear, as we shall see.

It makes a difference what title you give a story. It's the first act of interpretation, and it frames how we read the story. For example, if the story of Cinderella was known instead as The Story of the Two Step-Sisters, we might be more inclined to consider the story from their perspective—to wonder why they are the way they are, to wonder what it's like to live with a step-sister who talks to animals or with a mother whose standards you'll never meet. You get the idea; a title points us in a particular direction, affects how we read a story.

Which brings me back to this morning's story—one most of us know as 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son,' despite the fact that the word 'prodigal' doesn't appear in the story and the title isn't added until much later. However, because we know it as 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son,' we have likely always read it as a story about the younger brother—that wayward and irresponsible child—the one who boldly claims his half of the inheritance before his father has died and who then travels to a far land where he proceeds to squander the whole of it. When a famine hits the land, this younger son is left high and dry—starving and reduced to feeding pigs. And so, he decides to go home; to tell his father that he has behaved poorly and that he is willing to be a servant. Whether or not this younger son means what he plans to say is not clear in the text, although nothing in his speech indicates any remorse—only the awareness that he will need to express contrition to his father. Nor does the text indicate whether or not the younger son expects his father to accept his speech—though the fact that the father gave him his half of the inheritance would point to a rather indulgent parent.

What we do know is that the father has been waiting for the son and comes running to greet him, that the son only gets half of his prepared speech out before his father is ordering robes and rings to be brought and a celebration to be started. When we read 'The Parable of

the Prodigal Son,' our natural inclination is to put ourselves in the role of the title character. Even those of us who more closely resemble the older brother do our best to imagine what it is to be the younger brother, the one in need of such forgiving grace. Read from this perspective, the parable highlights the father's ability to forgive; and the invitation extended to us, as readers, is to consider where we have run away from home, from God, and to return, to repent or change direction, so that God can rush out to meet us with wide, open arms. Read from the perspective of the younger son, this is a parable of good news and extravagant grace.

But that's not all that it is. You may remember from last week that parables are designed to contain within themselves many possible interpretations and a myriad of meanings, and this parable is no different. New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine writes that on her more cynical days she is "inclined to call the story the 'Parable of the Absent Mother,'<sup>1</sup> but she thinks the best title might be 'The Parable of the Man Who Had Two Sons (and Forgot How to Count).'<sup>2</sup> Whatever we call it, the parable is unique to Luke (you won't find this story in Matthew, Mark or John), and it is the third of three parables that Jesus tells together.

In the first parable, Jesus tells of a shepherd who has 100 sheep. One sheep goes missing and the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep behind to go and find the one that is lost. When he finds it, he calls together friends and neighbors to celebrate. There are a number of questions we might ask at this point such as, why a shepherd would leave 99 sheep unprotected to go and find one, how the shepherd allowed the sheep to go missing in the first place, how it was that the shepherd even noticed that one out of a hundred sheep was missing, or who watched the sheep while he was busy celebrating with neighbors and friends, but let's leave those for now and look at the second parable.

In the second parable, Jesus tells of a woman who has 10 silver coins. Ten coins is certainly easier to keep track of than 100 sheep, but, nevertheless, she misplaces one and so she turns the house upside down to find the one coin, and when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. Again, there are questions we might ask, in particular, does the amount of that one coin even exceed what she spends to entertain her friends and neighbors? But again, I digress.

A man with 100 sheep, a woman with 10 coins, and then the story of a man with 2 sons—things are getting simpler. Surely 2 sons are easier to keep track of than 100 sheep or 10 coins. But because the first two parables are nearly identical in their structure—something goes missing, the owner goes to great lengths to get it back, and when it is found he or she calls friends and neighbors to rejoice—when the third parable begins, 'there was a man with two sons,' we, as listeners, know what to expect—one of the sons is going to go missing and the father is going to worry. What we, as 21st century listeners, might miss, however, is the long Jewish history associated with stories that feature two sons. As Amy-Jill Levine puts it, every

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* DVD (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018).

Jews know that when there is a story with two sons, you always go with the younger son. Adam had two sons, Cain (who is older) and Abel (who is younger), but Abel is the one whose sacrifice is acceptable to the Lord. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael (the firstborn) and Isaac (the younger son), but it is Isaac who inherits the covenant. Isaac has two sons, Esau (who is born first) and Jacob (his younger twin), but it is Jacob who gets the birthright and the blessing. If you have a story with two sons, every Jew listening to Jesus tell the story would know, you always go with the younger son.<sup>3</sup>

But this is a parable, and parables are designed to upend your expectations, to change your perspective, and this one is no different.

There was a man who had two sons and the younger one takes his share of the inheritance and goes off and wastes it all, and when he returns his father rejoices—it's the story we expect after hearing the first two parables; it's the story we expect when we know the Old Testament stories where there are two sons. But this parable isn't over, because this is a parable about a man who had two sons and so far we've only encountered one of them.

The heart of the parable, the kicker, if you will, comes after the parable has run its expected course, after it has fulfilled our assumptions about where it is going. It comes after the younger son has been lost and then found, after the celebration has begun and the dancing is underway.

There was a man who had two sons, but one of them is still in the fields. When he approaches the house, he hears the music and dancing and learns that his brother has returned and his father has killed the fatted calf. Angry and upset, he refuses to go in. In other words, there's been enough time to call the band and have the neighbors gather, but no one thought to call the older son.

There was a man who had two sons, but which of them is lost remains up for grabs.

A parable can contain many meanings, and this one is no different. It may be that the parable we need to hear is the parable of the Prodigal Son, the one about a God whose love and hospitality is so great that it breaks all rules of decorum, sense, and fairness. Perhaps the invitation for us is to extend that love and welcome to others; or perhaps it is to recognize that that unbridled love and welcome is for us as well.

Or maybe the parable we need to hear is the parable of the father who forgot how to count, the one that reminds us that there are always those whom we have forgotten to count—those who do not know we love them even though we think our love is obvious. Maybe the invitation for us is to notice those who are missing and those whom we haven't counted.

Or maybe the parable we need to hear is the parable of the older brother, the one that asks us to reconsider the older brothers—the ones who get left out of the stories, out of the covenant, out of the family. Maybe the invitation for us is to go back and read those Old

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Testament stories from the perspective of the older brothers, to see what we might have missed before. Or, maybe the invitation is just to go in and enjoy the party, to trust that we are wanted even when someone forgets to say so.

Or maybe the meaning lies somewhere else. The infuriating and/or delightful (depending on your perspective) thing about parables is that there is no one right answer, no one correct interpretation and we will never know for certain why Jesus told the parables he did. What we do know is that Jesus told parables that were designed to challenge, to discomfort, to shift our perspective, and so if we hear a parable and don't feel uncomfortable, we likely need to read it again, to consider it from a different perspective.

There was a man. who had two sons.

Thanks be to God.