

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Luke 15:11–32

Most often when Jesus is asked a question – particularly one that is a little tough – he frequently answers with a story. Stories open up possibility. Stories make us think. They capture our imaginations. Stories allow us to identify with different characters, let us see a bit of ourselves in others. Stories teach us empathy and compassion. It’s no wonder Jesus taught with stories.

Over the next several weeks, we will spend some time with the story commonly known as the Prodigal Son. We will look at it from different angles, and different viewpoints. I’ve never done something like this before – using the same story over the course of several weeks, and in fact, even though this is one of the most widely preached upon stories in the bible, in my 18 years of preaching – I’ve never had opportunity to preach on this story. I have taught it and studied it with others, but never preached on it.

The Prodigal is probably one of the most famous stories Jesus told, the story about a father with two sons, the youngest of whom, asked for his share of the inheritance, and then skips town and squanders it all away, and eventually returns home again. As I’ve already referred to it, the story is often titled, “The Prodigal Son.” Often it is titled, “the lost son”. Prodigal, in its original meaning, is a word that means one who does not follow the will of his father. It is also defined as one who spends money or resources in a foolish and extravagant way. Because it is known as the story of the Prodigal Son, we tend to focus there – with the younger son – and we will do that this week, but sometimes this story is also called,

“The Story of the Prodigal and His brother,” which at least acknowledges that there is another son who we will talk about next week. Finally, there is one translation that titles this parable, and the two that come before it of the lost sheep and the lost coin, as “Occasions to celebrate.” We will delve into that in a couple of weeks.

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Holy God, Word made flesh, let us come to this story open to being surprised. Silence our agendas; banish our assumptions; cast out our casual detachment. Confound our expectations; clear the cobwebs from our ears; penetrate the corners of our hearts with this word. We know that you can, we pray that you will, and we wait with great anticipation. Amen.

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.’”

Perspective matters. Nuance matters. A few years back a survey was done asking why the young son got into the trouble that he did. The survey was completed by people in North America, Russia, and Africa.ⁱ Russians answered his troubles were because of famine. The opinion from Africa was that he ran into trouble because no one would help him.

North Americans said the trouble was he squandered away his living. Different circumstances, different perspectives lead to different interpretations and conclusions.

Most often, when I would think of this story that Jesus tells, I would see it as the story of the lost younger son who dishonored his own father by wishing him dead when asking for his inheritance, and then after squandering it all away on illicit living, realized his sins and faults and sought redemption and forgiveness, and before he could even utter an apology he was accepted back into the family. All was forgiven, all was well. Except this story is more complicated than that.

In her excellent book, “Short Stories by Jesus: the Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi,” author Amy-Jill Levine suggests that we have missed some things in this familiar story when we reduce it to sin and forgiveness.

First, she suggests that what many see as insult at the least, and sinfulness at the worst when the younger son asks for his inheritance from his father wasn't that big of a deal. For rich people, she says, it was common for a father to give a younger son some substantial amount of money to make their own way in the world. In the story, there is no admonishment from the father when the inheritance is requested. Instead, it is given freely.

The young son then sets out on his own. In going far away, the young son leaves all the security and safety of what is known, and the support network that has sustained him thus far in his life. He wastes the money on a life of excess and poor judgements. Jesus does not tell us that the young man “sinned.” Being irresponsible, stupidity, and poor judgement are not the same thing as sin.

Having lost everything, the young man is hungry, starving. He must take a job. The job he can find is feeding pigs. Many commentators suggest, again, that this is another sin, that this young man set out to break Jewish purity laws but he is starving and does what he needs to do to survive. His problem is not that he is breaking a law, his problem is that he is starving and alone.

At rock-bottom, the story tells us the young man, “comes to himself,” he comes to his senses and he makes a plan to return home. Again, many view this as an act of repentance – an acknowledgement of sin – the first step in repairing a broken relationship but I am not so sure. Jesus does not say the young son repented, only that “he came to himself.”

This could imply some soul-searching and repentance, but it isn’t explicit. Again, Jesus says nothing here about repentance. Maybe there is a realization but from what sin in the story does the young son have to repent? maybe he was foolish and irresponsible but not sinful.

Maybe coming to himself, means something a little more nefarious. Maybe coming to himself means the young son finally realizes he can be cunning once more. In the story, the young son in coming to his senses realizes that his father’s servants have “bread enough to spare.” But one commentator saysⁱⁱ this passage could be a realization that the young son thinks the servants have too much bread. This small difference matters between bread enough to spare, and too much bread. What if the realization by the young son is that the servants don’t deserve more bread than him, the beloved son who has always received whatever he has asked for from his father. He does not think of his situation against his older brother. Instead, he reflects on his situation over-against people who should be below him, the servants. I’m not sure that sounds like soul-searching, life-changing repentance.

What would the father need to hear for the young son to be welcomed back into the fold? Maybe these words are full of meaning and sorrow, but maybe they are empty, a mere show to get what the young man wants. Amy-Jill Levine notes that in other parables in the bible whenever there is an internal monologue with a character, whenever they are thinking to themselves, they are often up to no good.

We never get to know if the younger son is sincere. The rehearsed lines of apology are never uttered. When the father sees the son from a distance, he runs to embrace the young son and smothers him in kisses. When the young son finally is able to utter the rehearsed lines, it is almost as if the father ignores him altogether because he is too busy ordering the servants to get a fine robe, and a ring, and sandals to clothe the son in all the things that indicate his belovedness, and to kill the fatted calf so they can have a party. We never get a conversation; we never get a confession and assurance; we get a party.

We do not know if there is redemption and forgiveness. We don't really get resolution. Is the son re-made? He is re-robed, and re-shoed, and restored. But it is not clear if he is redeemed. He is simply welcomed and celebrated.

Maybe this isn't so much a story about forgiveness and grace as it is about belonging and welcome. About being a beloved child, no matter what. This is good news. As I alluded to earlier, Jesus tells this story as the third story of finding what was lost – a lost sheep, a lost coin – a lost son. I am sure we all know the relief of finding a precious thing we once thought was lost.

So much of the world, and frankly a lot of churches, tells us that we have to be near perfect to be accepted and loved. That we have to have it all together to be welcomed. That we have to be appropriate and polite. But this is not what Jesus says. Our job is to welcome the lost, with arms

wide open. Our job is to welcome those who were once with us, but then were gone. We don't need to wait until we hear the appropriate words of repentance.

But, I think, it is even a bigger than that. It's not just to hope for those who were once with us, but also to welcome anyone who has been labeled the prodigal, anyone who is dismissed. Firmly planted outside the house, ready to run with arms wide open to welcome those who may or may not have it all together. Our stance is not arms crossed, and stern-faced. We are not gatekeepers; we are not bouncers.

About 15 years ago, the United Church of Christ had a brilliant TV ad (and I wish the PCUSA had thought of it) that had a set of burly white men dressed in black and with dark sunglasses, behind a velvet rope, in front of a church door. As a gay couple approached, they put their hand up and said, "no," and move them aside. The white couple with the perfectly dressed kids get to go through the rope. The young Latino kid – no way. The black girl – no. The person in the wheelchair – not you. The tagline – Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we. A voice says, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Our job is to welcome radically, with arms wide open, ever ready to throw a party. Creating a larger community of beloved children of God. Our job is to share the things that give life: welcome, food, community, love. Our job is to utter the words, without reservation or hesitation, "Welcome home, child of God."

ⁱ [\[1\]](#) Mark Allan Powel, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*

ⁱⁱ <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2016/02/29/a-provocation-fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-c-luke-151-3-11b-32/>