

March 19, 2017

Third Sunday in Lent

Don't Tell Me Who to Love

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Luke 15:1-32

[The Parable of the Lost Sheep]

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ So 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? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And 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.' ⁷ Just 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.

[The Parable of the Lost Coin]

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? ⁹ When 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.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

[The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother]

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.'
²² 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. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for 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. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.'"

A boy at a state college asked a girl on a date, and she said yes. The next week he asked her friend on a date, and she also said yes. Well, #1 Girl liked the boy very much and was unhappy about him asking out #2 Girl, who was her very good friend. She said, "We need to tell him he can't date both of us." #2 Girl was kind of "Meh" about the boy, so she said, "Um, no thanks." So #1 Girl told the boy, "You shouldn't date both of us. It's awkward." He said, "Okay. No problem." #1 Girl got very angry and transferred to a Christian college – and became a missionary. (No lie!) #2 Girl married the boy and they became a preacher and a professor, respectively, in Indiana.

Jesus also played the field, if you will, and his most religious friends didn't like it one bit. He hung out with whomever he wanted to hang out with – which drove Pharisees and scribes crazy, Luke says at the beginning of chapter 15.

"*You shouldn't date tax collectors and sinners,*" they said, "*it's awkward.*" But Jesus wasn't having it. "*Don't tell me who to love,*" he told them in a three-part, passion-marking parable about lost things, specifically sheep, coins, and sons – "Passion-Marking" in both the detail and the overall design, offering another window into Jesus' mission in Jerusalem, his own giving up of everything for his own children, leaving it to them (to us) to decide whether or not we want what he has given.

You know all three stories well enough that I'm going to skip lots of delicious detail and history this time. Jesus starts with an outrageous example: "*Which of you, having 100 sheep and losing one, does not leave the 99 to find the one?*" If we aren't at church, what's the answer? All of us! Answer for yourself. Would you leave 99 sheep in danger to go

find one that was already lost? Of course not! That's stupid, and irresponsible, and wasteful.

Last Sunday afternoon a fox came into my yard where my 19 hens were pecking around. When he left I had 17 live hens, one dead hen, and one missing hen. I did not leave the 17 to find the one. I took care of the 17 I could find right then. "*Which of you, having 100 sheep and losing one, does not leave the 99 to find the one?*" Answer: **All of us. All of us DO NOT leave the 99 we can keep safe to find the one we already failed to keep safe.** The Bible doesn't need you to put your brain in your pocket. Jesus knows he's asking an outrageous, ridiculous question.

The second example, less outrageous (but also less unanimously answered): "*Which of you, losing a tenth of your liquid assets, would not search and search until you found it?*" Personally, I absolutely would. I pick up pennies off the ground. But others would calculate their time, forego the aggravation, choose to get by on 90%. As Carl's Uncle Mac, who never had two dimes to rub together, always said: "*Easy come, easy go.*"

As Jesus tells it, what the losses have in common is that in both cases finding what was lost triggers a party: friends and food. The very implication being that what was lost becomes that which both necessitates and funds the celebration. The woman finds her money – and uses it to throw a party. The shepherd finds his sheep – and uses it for a barbeque. "*We must rejoice!*" say the finders in Jesus' voice, but speaking for heaven, rejoicing over even one sinner (or tax collector or scribe or Pharisee) who repents.

And then, "*There was a man who had two sons.*" The same sentence starts half a dozen Old Testament stories too, stories full of the hurt and bitterness and betrayal and irreparable damage common between fathers and sons and brothers, and mothers and daughters and sisters, and fathers and daughters and sons and sisters and brothers, and every other combination of parents and children and cousins and uncles and aunts and grandparents ever configured in the history of humanity and labelled with that most baggage-laden, heartbreaking, joy-giving, complicated of all F-words: FAMILY.

A man had two sons, and they were pretty terrible boys. Both were very privileged. But each, in his own way, is also ungrateful and disrespectful, always craving one thing but needing another, each son in turn choosing famine over feast. We call it the parable of the prodigal son. Henri Nouwen called it *the parable of the lovesick father*. It matters to locate the parable in the time and place where it was legal and normal for an oldest son to inherit a double portion of his father's estate – that is, double what his brothers receive. Having two boys meant this man's #1 Son was entitled to two-thirds and his #2 Son to one-third of his estate. (Deut. 21:15-17)

What if he'd had three boys, how would it have been divided? 50%, 25%, 25%. How about four boys? 40%, 20%, 20%, 20%. I mentioned this in Bible Study on Thursday, to which Diana I. said (insightfully, I thought), "Well this older son just needs to shut up!"

And #1 Son did, for a long, long time. He kept his mouth shut and his head down and he worked – for a lot of years apparently – until one day, he just couldn't. #2 Son was selfish, opportunistic, scheming and frivolous. (Remember, I'm an oldest child, thus my choice of words.) Remember the bad kids in high school who were always super charming around parents? Or the sibling who somehow always got out of cutting the grass or washing dishes? #1 brother **always** cut the grass, and made perfect grades, and never got in trouble, and did everything he was told, and the only fun he had was at football practice. Maybe his dad's friends called him "solid" – *that's a solid kid* – the way my mom said I was the kid *she never had to worry about*. He may have been solid. But he was also really, really, really, really angry.

Now obviously, none of these characters was real. Jesus made them up for the parable. But I know in my bones that being the kid your parents don't have to worry about IS real. And it can be tiresome, amen? It can be tiresome to watch siblings grieve your parents over and over. It can be tiresome to be the dependable kid, the kid who gets called to deal with the mess and the trouble. Year after year after year after year, I can imagine these boys living together in a house where one can't do anything wrong and the other can't do anything right, until one day they just can't take it any more.

That day came first for #2 Son. "*Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.*" What would you do? In this father's place, knowing good and well your child would do with the money precisely what he did with it, would you give it to him, or her? Because remember, the dad doesn't have to. I know what Carl Briggs would do. He'd say, "*Tell me your plan.*" #2 Son didn't say, "I need it for medical school" or "I've found a different farm I want to buy." Just, "Give me the money."

"*Dissolute living,*" Luke called it. His brother's description was even saltier. Then again, he's pretty angry, maybe the teeniest bit jealous of a life with no responsibility or consequences. The father in Jesus' story had every right and every reason to say *no*. Friends, it's really not possible to overstate the private shame #2 Son caused his father just by asking. But far more than that, I cannot overstate the public shame the father caused his whole family by agreeing to it, by saying yes. All he had to do was say *no*. *No, son, absolutely not; you don't know what you are asking.*

Instead, he cashed out a third of all his material worth and gave it to his second son. He sold land, probably. To his neighbors, probably. Who asked why he was selling, probably. Why? Consider his quandary. First of all, he cannot possibly please both sons. One is going to be hurt, no matter what he chooses. I could extrapolate for a while here: maybe the second son needs to hurt; maybe he needs some boundaries; maybe he needs to go wild on his own dime.

Second, he can save face with his other son and his community, essentially at the cost of holding his son prisoner until he himself is literally dead, instead of just figuratively dead, which to #2 Son he already is anyway. Because even to ask for the money was to say to his dad, "I wish you were dead; my life would be better if you were dead; I would

be happier if you were dead.” Or, he – the father – can simply tell the truth in word and in deed, the truth which is: he loves his sons more than he cares about his property. He loves his sons more than he cares what his neighbors think and say. He’d rather let his son go and maybe lose him, than hold onto him so hard he breaks him for sure.

Norman Maclean wrote a book that Robert Redford made into a movie called A River Runs Through It. The movie is about a father who had two sons. It is also about fishing. So it has lots in common with the gospel of Luke. The movie father is a Presbyterian minister. My favorite line of his is when he calls a Methodist *a Baptist who can read*. The movie tracks our parable nearly perfectly until the very end.

But the movie ends in a wonderfully satisfying and entirely predictable way, altogether unlike Jesus’ parable, which feels like it’s just over. #1 Son hears the party and won’t go inside. From there it falls apart and just sort of ends. We can’t be as happy for the dad as we want to be, because the son who’d been a jerk all along is now being good and the one who’d been good all along is now being a really big jerk, and we’re kind of more mad at him for being a jerk once than we were at the other one for being a jerk forever.

Like a cliffhanger but without a new season, we never find out if #1 Son forgave his dad for forgiving his brother the way that he did. We also don’t know if #2 Son **stayed** home for good – or only until he wasn’t hungry and broke anymore. (Because, that’s been my experience with sons and daughters like him.) But here’s what we do know, and know for sure: *We know that both boys needed to be better sons, and neither of them deserved to be given a party. But they were both invited in all the same.*

We know for sure that their father loved each and both of his sons completely. He gave them everything he possessed, including his reputation, at the risk of losing them both. And we know that *the one and only thing* he withheld from his children was the right to dictate to him who and how he would love his beloved.

Friends, why is it so difficult for people with everything to let people with hardly anything have what **they** need too? This week, I’ve read and listened to full-grown men, men with college degrees and expensive haircuts (full disclosure: I have expensive hair), men with tremendous economic and political power, say that feeding poor children and poor elderly people simply is not a proven good use of tax money. And truly, friends – truly – I am amazed. Not that they think it, of course. OF COURSE politically powerful people THINK this. But until this week, it was something they only say when they think the mic is off or when *they* are tyrants in movies like *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*. I am amazed they say this out loud, in public, and on the record. These “leaders of the free world” call press conferences to say it, then go on CNN and say, “Yep, I said that.” And I can’t stop thinking, “Surely I’m going to wake up soon.”

And then I realize, it’s not just the guys with the fancy haircuts, but rather a kind of biological instinct that went haywire as we evolved socially. Because it’s not just in

people. If you have Netflix, go home and watch the Disney documentary Growing Up Wild. You can also rent it on YouTube for \$3.

The scene that matters here is one in which a brown bear is nursing her cubs – big mouthy cubs, sucking like crazy, milk flying everywhere, and wrestling each other at the same time – when one breaks off and attacks the other because, at least as the scientist says, he believes his brother is getting more milk than him. So they have to go fake-fight for a few minutes – which their mom of course can't stand because she has other things to do besides nurse, so she's bawling them out. And mind you, neither cub was being denied! They were both eating. Both had plenty. That twinge of anxiety that rises up in all of us now and then – the sensation that we won't have what we need to be okay – which for some people is a physical, material reality, is for others a deep and abiding emotional, psychological, spiritual reality for which they – we? – very often, don't even have words.

#1 Son does his best to express it, standing in the yard that night, refusing to go in to that party. I imagine him crying those angry tears men cry when they don't want to be crying, trying so hard to say what he has no words for, the loss he feels so deeply but cannot **say** to save his life. All that comes out is, *All this time you never gave me a party*. Everyone who's ever been where he is knows it wasn't about the party. #1 Son wanted his choices, his life, his work, his sacrifices, to count for something. He really, really, really wanted that to matter. It hurt him deeply in that moment to realize that, compared to a dead son come back to life, it just didn't.

In that moment, on that day, what mattered is that this beloved child who was lost – not misplaced, friends: lost, gone – is found; who was dead, is alive. That had to be a hard word for those scribes and Pharisees. The *solid* ones, the ones Jesus *didn't have to worry about*. To hear that God didn't love them more for their piety and their works, nor love sinners less for their shenanigans. He was their daddy after all – and their mama hen, as Jesus told it last week – who loves them because they are his (or hers, depending on the chapter). Every, single, last, one of them.

Don't tell me who to love, Jesus said. *After all, I love you, don't I?* And so He himself went and gave up everything he had, hoping we'd choose to let Him love us the way He wanted to all along, just for being his.

Would you pray with me?