

A Trip to the Lost and Found

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Luke 15:1–3

A man had two sons. You know the story. It's familiar. The older son inherits the land, the younger inherits enough money to go off and buy land somewhere else. The older son is dutiful, a "good son," a "religious son," who does everything his father asks. The younger son is impulsive, independent, headstrong. He gets in trouble.

It's a parable of repentance and rejoicing. Jesus told this parable to the people who were grumbling about the company He kept. He had the audacity to sit at table with "sinners," you know, the losers, the riff-raff, tax collectors, street walkers. Not the types you see in the synagogue or in the temple, except perhaps lurking in the dark corners in back unable to lift their eyes to heaven. Not the respectable pillars of the community, religious leaders, moral spokesmen. Sinners. Dirty, despicable sinners. Jesus ate with them. The religious hated Him for it.

He told them a parable. A riff of three parables, actually – a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. The first two set up the third. In the parable of the lost sheep, a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to seek and save one lost sheep, and upon return there is rejoicing and a party. A woman loses a coin and turns the whole house upside down looking for it, and when she finds it, there is rejoicing and a party. The pattern is set. Something is lost, the lost is sought, found and returned, and there is rejoicing and a party.

A man had two sons. The younger son couldn't wait for his father to die. He said, "Father, give me the share of the property that's coming to me." In other words, "Dad, you're worth more to me dead than alive, and since you seem in pretty good shape and not ready to check out any time soon, just sign over the inheritance check now and let me hit the road." In short, "Dad, drop dead." And the father did. He signed over the inheritance, gave the farm to the older brother, and kicked back into retirement.

It didn't take the young son more than a few days to pack his things and head off to a far country, far away from his father, his brother, his home. And far from home and family and

community, the young man did what so many young men do. He wasted his inheritance. We don't know how. "Reckless living," it says. No details provided. Wine? Women? Gambling? Who knows? Does it matter? No money. Inheritance gone. That's all that matters.

To make matters worse, a famine broke out in the far country. Problems always pile up, don't they? You lose your job, the kids get sick, the car breaks down. The young man had no money, no food; he's broke and homeless. He gets a job slopping hogs, which is about as rock bottom as it gets for a Jewish boy. Pigs were unclean, remember. And you know you've hit bottom when pig food starts to look good. But even that was not available.

Hungry, broke, lost, smelling like pigs, "he came to himself." "My father's hired servants are better off than this. They have food, a roof over their heads. I'm going to go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as a hired hand." And off he went back home.

He probably rehearsed his little speech on the road. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you...." He probably wondered, would his father accept him? Or would he turn his back on his son? There were no guarantees on this young man's road of repentance. No assurances that his plan would meet with success. He just went to the only place he knew: Home.

That's what repentance is. Returning home, where you belong. You've been away in a far country. You stink. You're broke. You're hungry. You're alone. You want to be home again. In your Father's house, where you belong.

When he was still far off, a little speck on the horizon, his father saw him. He'd been watching, looking down that road every day for his son. He recognized his walk. He had compassion. He ran down the road – something no respectable middle eastern father would have done – and ran up to him, this boy stinking of pigs, and he embraced him and kissed his filthy cheeks. And the boy can barely get his little speech out. He only makes it halfway through: "Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you..." while his father nearly smothers him in his arms and is calling out to the servants for the finest robe (remember Joseph?) and the family ring and shoes for his blistered feet. And he's ordering servants around to kill the calf and call the musicians and gather the people for a party. My son, my son, my son. He was dead and he's alive again; he was lost and he's found. And the music started and the wine flowed and the party began.

There are no deals in the arms of our heavenly Father. And any confession we make, is made in the embrace of His forgiveness. We don't earn our way home, we are received, welcomed home.

This parable really is first about Jesus Himself, the Son who left His royal throne, the home of His Father, emptied Himself of all the perks and privileges of being the only Son of the Father, took on our human Flesh and humbled Himself in the lostness of our death. He didn't squander the inheritance, we did. We all did. We all do. You do. Jesus came to the pig pen of our Sin, our mess, our muck and mire. He was baptized into it. He was crucified in the midst of it. He was buried in it. And having risen from the dead, He goes back home to the Father to be received at the right hand, wearing the royal robe and the signet ring of the Son with a eucharistic feast thrown in His honor.

The parable is about you too. You the penitent. You baptized into the Son. You in Christ embraced by the Father. You clothed in Christ and forgiven, called to be a child of God. You are that prodigal son, lost and found, dead and alive. God's Son has found you, claimed you, redeemed you, raised you, clothed you, forgiven you. It's because of Jesus that the Father love you and embraces you and welcomes you. You don't reek of your sins, you smell of Christ. You're not soiled with the mess you've made, you're washed with the blood of the Lamb and clothed with the robe of His righteousness.

There's an older brother. He's not at the party but out in the field, doing his work. He hears the sounds of celebration, the music, the singing, the dancing. He smells the roasted meat. He comes near to the house and asks a servant. "Hey, what's going on?" And the servant tells him, "Your brother has returned, and your father is throwing a party for him. He's safe and sound."

And the older brother is furious. He refuses to come near the party. He wants nothing to do with it. Even when his father comes out and pleads with him, he won't. He says, "Look, I've slaved for you all these years, I've done everything you asked me, I've never gotten into trouble, never done anything wrong, never disobeyed a single command, and you never even gave me so much as a goat so I could party with my friends. But when this son of yours, who wasted everything on hookers slinks home, you throw a party for him. I'll be damned if I set foot in that party for that son of yours.

But the father won't let him off so easily. "Son (notice that the father never disowns his sons), you're always here, always with me, everything I have is yours. But it's meet, right, and

salutary that we should celebrate. Your brother, your brother, was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found. We had to celebrate.”

And there the story ends. We’re left hanging. Will the older son go to the house or not? Will he join his younger brother to feast at the expense of his father’s prodigal mercy? Or will stew in his anger and resentment outside of a party in which he has a place? Will he rejoice at his the lavish grace of a father who forgives both his sons, the good one and the bad one, who welcomes home the lost, who justifies the sinner?

At the end of the parable, which son is lost? The commandment keeper. The religious son. The one who did all the right things for all the wrong reasons. And in the end, what keeps him out of the party? Not the father! He’s begging him to come. Not his brother! He has only himself to blame if he’s excluded.

Jesus told this parable to the religious, who imagined that they didn’t need to repent and who looked down on those who did. The ones who grumbled about the sort of company Jesus kept for dinner companions. We “lifers,” we religious people, we who have literally grown up in the Father’s house run the same risk when we begin to imagine that a place in His house is earned. That sinners need to clean up and smell nice before they are welcomed in their father’s home.

Only those who see themselves as sinners will rejoice in the repentance of a sinner.

Only those who see the rebel in themselves, will join this party of rogues and prodigals called the church.

Jesus our Brother, the Father’s Son, went to the depths to save us. He was lost but is found. He was dead but now lives. And you are found and live in Him. And the Father simply has to celebrate. The feast is ready.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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