

Seeking and Waiting

Luke 15:1-10

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 15:11-32

March 6, 2016 Lent 4C

Luke 15 is sometimes called the gospel within the Gospel. It's like John 3:16, "For God so loved the world," in that regard. If you really understand what Jesus is saying, you become drawn into a better understanding of, and what's more important, a deeper relationship with God. You learn something about what it is to be human. You learn something about unconditional love—the kind of love we don't deserve, but the kind of love that God offers. You learn something about hope, and yearning, and joy—not just ours but God's.

Jesus challenged the pride, prejudice, and preconceptions of the good people of his community—the people like us. They had been raising their eyebrows and sniffing, because Jesus was obviously hanging out with the wrong crowd. Didn't he know losers when he saw them? Why should he be so friendly with people who were obviously immoral, who lived outside the law and the expectations of good society? "Birds of a feather flock together," they would likely say.

Jesus, however, saw things from a different perspective. What kind of physician would it be who couldn't be bothered by sick people? There were, there are, so many people who had given up in despair of ever being loved by God. There had been too many compromises, too many wrong choices, too many disappointments, too many sins for God to love them, they had thought. But here is Jesus, treating them like a friend. So when Jesus is down there with the loan sharks and the hookers, that's when the good people, the people like us, raise their eyebrows. And Jesus tells them three stories, all with the same point.

The first story were about a shepherd who loses a sheep. This isn't just a third-person shepherd out there, Jesus says "suppose someone among you." First person. Imagine that the shepherd is your neighbor, and you and your friends are all called out to look for a sheep, one among a hundred, who is lost. The shepherd leaves the 99 safe in the pasture and you all go out with him on a search and rescue mission. Our shepherd doesn't believe in the "leave them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them" advice, but scrambles through the brush, clambers among the rocks, looking for the sheep, until he finds it. Richard Lischer, in his book *Reading the Parables*, describes this gesture of love. "in an act of undeclared affection, the man lays the sheep across his shoulders. He doesn't drive it home with a stick, but he *carries* it home. With this gesture and his rejoicing, the party begins while the man and his sheep are still in the wilderness. The rejoicing

will continue at home with friends and neighbors and, Jesus adds, in heaven.”¹ (unquote)

The second story Jesus tells us is the flip side of the coin. Instead of a man, it’s a woman. Instead of a shepherd, it’s a housewife. Instead of 1 sheep among 100, it’s 1 coin among 10. It doesn’t sound like much, but wouldn’t you work hard to find and reclaim 10% of your assets? So the woman lights the lamp, sweeps the floor, and keeps looking until she finds it. And just like the shepherd, she throws a party. She invites the neighbors over for food and drink. They sing, they laugh, they dance.

And then comes the third story, the climax of the three, for it is the most tender, poignant, and surprising of all. For what is lost in that story is not a sheep, not a coin, but a son. The younger son, a shallow and selfish lad at best, is tired of life on the farm. Tend the crops, tend the livestock, mend the fences, pull the weeds, and then do it all over again. It’s no fun! So he asks for his share of the inheritance. Basically, that’s saying, “I don’t want to wait around for you to die of old age before I get what’s coming to me, pops.” Ultimate disrespect. He was saying that his father was dead to him. Surprisingly enough, the father gave the son what he asks for, and with heavy heart watches him walk away. The son walks away from his home, abandons his family, and squanders everything. He ends up in a gentile area, and the only job he can find is tending the pigs. He’s so hungry that the pig slop looks good to him. He’s unclean now. He couldn’t practice his Jewish faith if he wanted to. He’s alienated from his family and from God.

All of a sudden, there comes a realization. Even his father’s slaves had it better than he does. His father, although a soft touch, was a decent and kind man. His father couldn’t possibly welcome him back as a son, but maybe...maybe. He memorizes a speech. “Father, I have offended against heaven and against you. Please take me on as a slave.” He repeats it, mumbling to himself, as he leaves the pig pen and starts the long road home. But he can’t get the words out of his mouth, because his father rushes to meet him, hugs him, treats him like visiting royalty, and throws a party!

Timothy Haut retells the story in his poem, “Prodigal.”

PRODIGAL

A blackbird keeps watch
from the top of a tall cedar,
his feathers glossy
in the early spring sun.
A dusty road

¹ Richard Lischer, *Reading the Parables*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 96

spills from around a bluff,
which casts a long shadow
across the greening fields.
There he comes,
this lean, broken boy
who has spit in the eye
of the world,
who has swaggered as far
from the farm in the boondocks
as his old man's money could take him,
who has danced with the devil
till he was nearly dead.
He is defeated, bent, hungry, lost,
and there is only one road left to try:
Home.
He is afraid
that he has burned all his bridges.
He has nothing good
to show for these months away.
He is prepared for a locked door,
a dead end.
And then he stops in his tracks
at a ruckus up ahead,
stops to grasp this miracle of a thing.
It's the old man himself,
racing through the dusty sunlight,
arms wide, crazy with love.
Tears stream down his wrinkled face
in pure, plain joy.
"My son," he blubbers
into the boy's tangled hair.
Even the blackbird knows
that this is heaven,
or as close as it gets around here.
He fluffs his warm feathers.
sings, sings.²
(unquote)

But, there's another son, the older son, the righteous son, who had never given his father any trouble. He must have laid awake at night, hating what his brother had done; imagining all the irresponsible things that his brother was doing. And now that punk kid has the audacity to come back home? And his father throws a party for him? His father pleads for him to come in and

² © Timothy Haut, on Midrash.com

enjoy himself. The older brother refuses, and blames the father for playing favorites. But the father says "Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is now alive. He was lost and now is found." (15:31)

Jesus tells these three lost-and-found stories in Luke 15 to show us what God is like. God seeks us out and tries to love us back into relationship, into new life, into transformed life, because that's who God is. God wants all of us to come back home, whether sinner or saint-in-process. And God wants to throw a party. When Jesus described God's coming reign, he described it as an eternal party, a banquet, a time of fullness and rejoicing, of singing and laughing. Or, as Amazing Grace puts it, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun."

What church are we? The church of lost sheep, lost coins, lost children who have been found. The church of shepherds and housewives and parents celebrating the return of something precious and lost. The church of older brothers and sisters who are still trying to sort out our feelings and trying to decide whether the party is for us, too.

In these stories, Jesus reminds us that we should be open to love and accept others, even those we might not assume would be on God's guest list—people that we might raise our eyebrows at. For God's guest list is a whole lot longer than ours. Jesus reminds us that God's grace is so amazing, so overwhelming, that God can transform the darker corners of our own lives, and accept us even when we don't feel so acceptable. Jesus reminds us to respond to God's amazing grace with joy and celebration, to help get us in the mood for the great party that is to come. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon

We come to prayer as a worshiping community. We seek God in prayer, and trust that God seeks us, as well. God listens. God cares. God receives us with joy.

Prayer: (mind) Creator of Beauty, help us to find the beauty in life, in Your creation, in our very selves. Help us to lift up what is good and wonderful, kind and thoughtful and beautiful, in our lives and in the lives of others. Call us away from the negativity in the world that causes us to judge and look down on others, and instead to embrace Your goodness that is in all that You have created.

O God, sometimes we feel far away from you and your love. Help us remember that you are always close to us. Help us to remember that you are always ready to welcome us home to your love.

Healing God, hear us as we pray for...

Bless this church, dear God. Help us to become more faithful to you and your mission. Help us to find the joy of your presence. Help us to share that joy with others.

In the name of Jesus the Christ, who turned death into eternal life, and turns our sin into forgiveness and restoration, we pray. Amen.

Communion: (jwr) In the story of the lost son and prodigal father, why was there a table set? Why was there a feast offered to the whole community? Why was the youngest son received with a new robe, the family signet ring on his finger, and sandals on his calloused feet?

The father explained it in these words: "We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found" And they began to celebrate. Surely this morning we have reason to celebrate and join in the glad feast. It is a feast of forgiveness. It is a feast of reconciliation. We are alive in the eternal hope, and are found in the eternal grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. If ever there is anything to celebrate, it is in breaking the bread of life, and drinking from the cup of salvation.

The elder son sat outside, away from the feast of forgiveness. It was a matter of his choice not to join in. He was never excluded from the table. He was welcomed. The table is set before us today in remembrance of the death that brings life for the lost in Jesus Christ. You are not excluded, but you are welcomed to partake of the bread of the broken body and the cup of redemptive love through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.