

Two Lost Sons
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Sermon by Dan Schrock
Lent 4, March 6, 2016

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

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.’”
(NRSV)

I

Most of my life I’ve assumed that this parable is about repentance and forgiveness. People get to the theme of repentance and forgiveness partly by focusing on the younger son, often called the prodigal son. People also get to this interpretation from verses 18 and 19. In those verses the starving younger son decides to go back home, confess the error of his ways, and beg daddy to take him back. Based largely on these two verses, most preachers and Sunday school teachers say this parable is about the younger son’s

repentance and his father's forgiveness. Many Bible commentaries accept this interpretation. It's how most of us understand this parable. First the son sins; eventually he repents; and finally daddy forgives.

However, that is probably not the best interpretation. A better interpretation is that this parable is instead about losing and finding. Both the younger son and the older son get lost, while the father eagerly tries to find both of them again. The father wants both his sons to be integrated into family life, but the end of the parable suggests the father does not fully succeed in his quest.¹

II

As I've already noted, verses 18 and 19 are the main reason most people think this parable focuses on the theme of repentance and forgiveness. Let me read again those two verses in the NRSV: "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.'" To our eyes and ears in the twenty-first century West, the younger son sounds contrite. We accept his words at face value. To us it seems like an authentic confession of sin.

The problem is that Jewish listeners in the first century likely would not have heard these verses as a genuine confession. They would have questioned the younger son's motives. They likely would have heard the younger son's words as a conniving and manipulative ploy to squeeze daddy for more money.

Here's why. The younger son sounds an awful lot like Pharaoh. Think back to the showdown in Exodus between Pharaoh and Moses. In Exodus 10:16, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and says to them: "I have sinned against the LORD your God and against you." Those words sound eerily similar to the words of the younger son, who in verse 18 and again in verse 21 says: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." No Jew in the first century, or in any century for that matter, would believe Pharaoh was genuinely sorry for his actions. Pharaoh was certainly not repenting. Instead he was under

¹ Many of the ideas in this sermon come from Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 25-70.

intense political pressure to get rid of the locusts which were then plaguing his country. He was just pretending to repent so Moses and God would take away those awful locusts. To put it bluntly, Pharaoh was lying to get what he wanted. For this reason, first century Jews standing around when Jesus told this parable would have suspected the younger son was also lying—his words were virtually the same words Pharaoh used.

Recall the younger son's situation. He had asked for, and had received, a huge amount of cash from daddy. Then he merrily went off to spend that cash frivolously on foolish things. We call him a "prodigal," an apt word that means to act in a recklessly wasteful way. Now this foolish son is stranded in a foreign land, his money gone, no friends or family in sight, a famine surrounding him, with nothing to eat. Starvation is staring him in the face. He's desperate for something to eat, even if it means conning other people to get it.

So he cooks up a plan. He'll go back home to daddy and plead for employment as a hired hand. But look carefully at speech he prepares in verses 17-19. Three times, and again a fourth time in verse 21, he chooses the word "Father." Four times the son inserts "Father" into his speeches. By using the word "Father," the son hopes to appeal to daddy's emotions, reminding daddy they're still family, even though he's been an irresponsible fool by squandering daddy's money on empty living. It's as if he asks himself, "How can I get three regular meals a day and a roof over my head? I know: I'll squeeze more money out of daddy by slyly pretending to ask for a servant status, while calling him "Father." That should do the trick! That old softie will probably cave in and welcome me back as a son!"

The plan works. The son deploys that emotionally-laden word "Father" from one side of his mouth while deploying "hired hand" with the other. But no matter. Daddy is so delighted to have this lost son home again that he throws a lavish party. O happy day! My son that was lost is now found!

III

A major piece evidence that this parable is indeed about losing and finding comes from the literary context. Luke 15 has three closely-related parables, and this one is the third of three parables. The first parable in chapter 15 is about the shepherd who loses a sheep, goes out to find it, recovers it, and then calls his friends and neighbors together for a party. The second parable is about the woman who loses a coin and works diligently to find it. At the end she too calls friends and neighbors together for a party.

This strongly suggests the third parable is also about losing and finding. If this third parable were really about repenting and forgiving, then we would expect the first two parables to have that same theme as well. But they're clearly not about repentance and forgiveness at all. Sheep and coins cannot repent. It makes the most sense to say all three parables explore the same theme of what is lost and what is found.

IV

Up to this point the parable of the father and his sons has closely followed the pattern of the previous two parables. The father lost a son but has now found him again. He's so happy about it that he has a party for his friends and neighbors.

But now comes a twist. This father has *two* sons and *both* of them are lost. It's unfortunate that we call this "the parable of the prodigal son," because that title draws our attention to the younger son. Instead we should really call it something like "the parable of the lost sons," because the older son is just as lost the younger one, though for different reasons.

How is the older son lost? Well, daddy and older son don't have a good relationship with each other. On the surface this relationship looks fine, because the older son is responsible, prudent, hard-working, sensible, obedient, and dutiful, just what most parents want in their children. But when we look under the surface we learn the older son feels that daddy is taking him for granted. He feels neglected, and as a consequence of daddy's neglect, the older son seethes with resentment.

Have you ever pondered the strange ending of this parable? The parable ends in the middle of an argument. Daddy and the elder son are arguing with each other outside in the field. Inside the house everyone else is dancing, playing music, and feasting on roast beef. But outside in the field is an unresolved argument. The parable stops right there, with these family relationships still deeply troubled. When the parable ends we are left with uncomfortable and unanswered questions about losing and finding. And the questions shift around depending on which character you identify with in the story.

- If you identify with the father, the parable asks how you're going to handle your lost children. The parable hints that indulging your children will never buy their genuine love. The father tried that with his younger son and it didn't work. Yet it also hints that withholding resources from your children will stifle their love and turn them away from you. The father did that with his older son and it didn't work either. Above all, the parable asks you this: When your family is not whole, what will you do to try and make it whole again?
- If you identify with the younger child, perhaps you are not very likeable or trustworthy. Yet your father or mother loves you and throws you expensive parties. Where and how will you repent? How will you demonstrate some responsibility? How will change happen in your life?
- If you identify with the older child, what will you do next? Will you join the party? Stomp off in anger? When your parents die and you have your share of the inheritance, how will you treat your younger sibling?

In this parable it seems that no one has expressed any sorrow for the way they've hurt others. What does this mean for family life? What holds our families together when relationships are this strained?

VI

The parable of the two lost sons asks us to realize that the persons we've lost might be in our own household. Yet in spite of the hard questions, the parable does suggest a way forward. It suggests that you might want to eat meals and invite others to join you. Maybe repentance and forgiveness will come in time or maybe they won't. But in any case get the people together and see what happens.

Many of Jesus' parables are crafted so that you and I get to complete them. This parable is a great example of this. How will you and I complete this parable in our own lives, with our own efforts at reconciliation and change? Where does this parable touch your family? How do you want it to become living ink in your life?