

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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March 19, 2017

Luke 15:1-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ““My son,’ the father said, ‘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 alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Confounding Love

It appears that Jesus didn’t just tell stories. He told story problems.

First, the shepherd and the sheep. If you grew up in a city or a suburb, you may not know much about sheep. You don’t realize they really aren’t that smart. Unlike cattle

who keep moving, sheep will eat the grass in front of them right down to and including the roots, destroying their pasture if not driven off. And the thing sheep like to do best is eat green alfalfa which bloats and even kills them. They really need a shepherd, because, left to their own devices, they get into a lot of trouble.

Which is why when Jesus asks which one of you would leave ninety nine sheep alone to go search for one, the country person knows that recipe, given sheep and their tendency not to look after their own well being, will not result in ninety nine plus one, one hundred sheep, but maybe a flock of one. And God is like this shepherd?

Second, the woman and the coin. The woman doesn't just look high and low... she turns the house *upside down*. She puts aside all her housework, considerable (these are the days before washing machines, dishwashers, and gas or electric ovens) to hunt for this coin. Someone has said this is like saying which of you women would stay home from work during the busiest time of year (you are a tax accountant and it is early April) to look for something like your wedding photos? "No one in her right mind" is the answer that comes to mind, right? (*Provoking the Gospel of Luke*, p. 197) And God is like this woman?

These stories have their own power, but they are also a lead up to another even more confounding story, the story known as The Prodigal Son.

We think we know that story. "It is about repentance" someone said loudly, firmly at bible study. "Remember Jesus was talking to people who thought they were righteous, who thought they had no need themselves to ask forgiveness. The younger son, though a scoundrel, comes to his senses and repents." But does he really? It's quite possible that is not what Jesus was saying with his story, his third in a series story problem – or so suggests Richard Swenson, author of a storyteller's bible commentary.

Here's his personal reflection, a new way of understanding what could be going on with the prodigal son. But first, a show of hands. Raise your hand, if, like me, you are the oldest one in your family. Now listen to Richard Swenson reflecting on his own birth order, and the very different parenting that went on as his parents aged, relaxed, and realized, with their youngest, that this was the last kid to take his first steps, the last one to ride a bike, etc.

I remember the ninth grade class party. I am the oldest child. My rookie parents, good and solid in their love and support for me, stood by their notions of curfew. No one else had to be home that early. I argued. My father repeated his decision. I argued. My father repeated his decision. I argued. My father left the room.

A few years later, along came my sister, also going to the ninth grade class party. My parents, now a little more experienced, reached an equitable compromise with my sister that set her curfew one hour later than I had been given. I watched, knowing

that it would not help anything if I mentioned that this seemed unfair. My youngest sister was also watching.

One year later, along comes the ninth grade class party, same as every year. Along comes my youngest sister, who had apparently been taking notes for many, many years. The issue of curfew came up and she set it aside. She would rather talk about what fun the party would be and who she hoped to dance with and who was going with her. The issue of curfew came up again, and she set it aside again. She would rather talk about school and how her favorite teacher was going to be a chaperone for the party and how they readying the best book in her class and she wondered would the teacher have time to talk about that book tonight at the party? Finally my parents insisted that they had to talk about curfew. Reluctantly my sister agreed. They talked, they negotiated.

In the end, my sister let them talk her into coming home at midnight, an hour and a half later than my other sister had come home. You could do the math and figure out how I must have been feeling, but you'd be wrong. I was standing there with my mouth hanging open as I watched a master at work. My sister was actually arguing that she should be home earlier than midnight. It was my parents who were insisting that midnight was a better time. It was beautiful.

I'm guessing, Swanson said, that the elder brother in Jesus story would have also been standing there with his mouth open when the youngest talked Dad into pretending that he was dead so that the son could fictively inherit his share of the property.

Where is this all leading? To the possibility that when the youngest son "comes to himself" he is not in fact, repenting but simply calculating the bottom line. He has not fully felt the pain his father back home feels, with a son he may never again see face to face. He, the son, does not speak out loud about how grievous his own behavior has been.

No, finding himself in a bad situation, he simply realizes that the servants back home have more than enough to eat while he is starving. Sure he can correct this unpleasantness, yes, this unfairness, he begins practicing a speech he will give to his father, so that he can come home and be on the same level with the servants and at least no longer be wallowing with the pigs. Though the way Swanson tells it, likely the youngest knows his father well enough to believe his Dad isn't going to assign him to the servants' quarters.

"Father" he will begin. He'll look his dad in the eye, parents always like that. He'll say "I've sinned" and he'll get a little religion in there – Note, in good orthodox fashion, he won't speak God's name in his mouth. "I sinned against heaven and against you" He says. And then a final flourish, a final flourish with a pause: "I am no longer worthy.... make me as one of your hired workers". Having done his work, having gotten his practiced speech ready, he heads for home ready to deliver it.

Swenson, the storyteller commentator, says not only does this son know his Dad, the younger son wallowing in the pig pen, practicing his speech is only using bits of speeches he's used before. He didn't just up and go one day, there is a whole lot of history, a whole lot of well established tension and manipulation that has gone on before. Again the elder son sees this, and wonders how long its going to be before son number two takes off again, putting the whole farm in peril once again.

Does this interpretation bother you? It's not what we usually hear, but it is a story problem, just as the two earlier stories Jesus told were story problems. Parables are meant to play with us, to mess with our minds a bit. What Father would behave like this? As with the shepherd and the woman, people of Jesus day would say "No one in their right mind!" But what if God behaves like this? What then?

Recently I read Ann Patchett's new novel, *Commonwealth*. Patchett chronicles a family, two families, brought together by divorce and the remarriage of two of the parents. It is an honest book, imperfect people motivated by many things, high among them restlessness and fear. Like the movie *Manchester by the Sea* everything is not sewn up at the end. There is too much brokenness for that. This interpretation of the scripture, of an unrepenting younger son feels like that. It leaves God, the father, in the middle of something vulnerable, a volatile situation that may not turn out well.

The Prodigal Son is not a simple story. Perhaps it should be named The Prodigal Father. If the son is unrepentant, he might do this whole gig again. The elder son is certainly thinking this – that his father is questionable in how vulnerable he is making himself and indeed, the whole farm. But now, right here in the midst of the tension, let's not forget the lovely part – the joy quotient. What looks excessive, what looks wasteful, what looks problematic to the older son can also be seen as love. Undiluted love. For when the son comes home, the father puts a ring on his finger, a robe on his back, calls for a feast -- a great celebration is put in motion. Maybe he, the Prodigal Father, got the moment right and that is the point. His son has been as one dead to him, and now he is alive...is that not cause for great joy? There will be time later to have a heart to heart, to let the son know how hurtful the whole thing has been. There will be time later, within a loving embrace, to hope for a son who can come to terms with his own behavior, be accountable, and change.

Notice this: in this interpretation it is not you have to transform, you have to change in order to receive God's love. God's love, God's grace come first.

Which gets back to the people Jesus was talking to, the ones he's telling these stories to. It was religious people who didn't see things in that order. What they felt was good behavior merits reward. Bad behavior merits punishment. But Jesus says no, God's grace and God's love come first.

More than that, maybe the story also suggests that repentance, true and full repentance, doesn't happen in an instance -- and the father, for all his excessive joy,

if you can say such a thing knows this. This morning's UCC devotional mentions a poster declaring "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" with small print down below: Those who have already repented, disregard this notice" (Richard Floyd, *Still Speaking Devotional* of Sunday, March 19). Again, the father is overjoyed to see his son. The elder son sees this as stupidity, as wasteful, as lacking smarts. But the father isn't just living in this one moment and he got the moment right.

Joy is the right emotion when a once dead son returns. Joy is the emotion Jesus feels when anyone who is a sinner comes close enough to be welcomed and embraced. That is what he is trying to get across to the elder sons, the Pharisees, who stand apart and criticize. There will be time to account for behavior later. When it comes to control, and joy, joy wins. Love wins.

Accountability is important. Truth telling is important. Fairness is important. But what if this story was told to Jesus critics and Jesus followers alike to simply say you have to get first things first? First the love, the joy, the grace. And, of course, there is the reminder that religion that is absent. These things, or that puts these things last, is a most decidedly dour and dreary affair.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see.

May God save us from every attempt to keep putting something else before God's amazing grace. Amen.