

The Parable of the Lost Son
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March 30, 2025 – Lent 4C
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Since we are once again in "familiar story" territory this week, may I see a show of hands: who here has heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son before? Who thinks they could tell the story if asked? (Don't worry, I won't put you on the spot.) And how many of you have heard multiple sermons preached on it which focused exclusively on the actions of one of the sons?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is like a favorite, comfortable movie in some ways. We can put it on, recite the lines as they come, and not always really "see" what's going on because we know exactly who's going to say what next, and how it will end. That's more or less what it feels like for any preacher trying to deal with this parable: Are there different threads from the last time we heard it to pull from this rich tapestry? Do we pay attention only to the characters, and if so, which one? Do we try to translate the parable to a contemporary setting? And what can be said about it that hasn't already been said a thousand times?

To make a start at understanding what Jesus meant by telling this story, we need to take a look its context. This particular one is the third parable in a series which are about losing something vital and finding it. The parables which precede it are the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Both of them feature a human stopping at nothing to find a lost sheep or a lost silver coin. Once they succeed, they call up their friends to say, "Rejoice with me, for I have found what was lost." Jesus tells these parables in response to a group of Jewish leaders who are complaining about how he eats with tax collectors and sinners. The overall point he's trying to make is likely something along

the lines of "Eating with tax collectors is me looking for the lost, vital thing... because God will stop at nothing to find the people who are lost." And, what's more, that God wants everyone to come into the house to enjoy the party.¹ This message of radical inclusion dovetails nicely with Luke's overall theme is that Jesus is for everyone. Because that's the case, it makes good sense that God's hospitality must include everyone, even long-lost sons who spent every last penny of their inheritance.

If we accept that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is primarily about a lost person who's been found, we need to then ask the question: What exactly has been lost, along with the wayward younger child?

The answer depends on the character. From the father's perspective, he's lost his son. Also gone is half his property (though that clearly doesn't seem to matter all that much, given the presence of servants/slaves, a rich robe, and apparently large property and livestock holdings). What he *hasn't* lost is his honorable status among his friends. That much is clear from how they actually show up to celebrate the return of his missing younger son.²

From the older son's perspective, what's been lost is the same opportunity to celebrate with his friends as his lazy bum of a younger sibling was given. And, which his angry response to his father's pleading seems to suggest, he thinks he's lost some modicum of his father's respect and affection, which has been given, along with half the family's fortune, to his younger brother. From the father's perspective, that doesn't seem

¹ Tom Long, "Parables in Luke" (Preaching the Parables, class lecture at the School of Theology, Sewanee, Tennessee, June 21, 2018).

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* [New York: Harper Collins, 2014], 61.

to be the case. The older son isn't left out of the party deliberately. Nor is he ever separated from his father's affection. That he's outside the house, refusing to go in, is totally his choice – as is any decision he makes to decline his father's invitation to join the celebration.³

From the younger son's perspective, he's lost everything material his dad generously gave him. Maybe a little bit of his dignity is gone as well, since he was employed feeding pigs (which, for a Jew, would have been a really undesirable task, no matter how good the pay was). And maybe he's even lost a bit of his true sense of self. The scholar Amy-Jill Levine argues that this "true sense of self" includes knowing that his father will give him whatever he wants. His rehearsed speech sounds very much like that of Pharaoh when Pharaoh begs Moses to forgive him after God sends a plague of locusts to Egypt in Exodus 10. In that case, the reader is told that Pharaoh makes this plea with his fingers crossed behind his back. After God gets rid of the locusts, God then "hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let the Israelites go" (Exodus 10:20, NRSV). Levine also points out that the younger son's actions are no less morally ambiguous than those of the rich fool in Luke 12, who is a slave to his own greed, or the dishonest judge in Luke 18 who gives the persistent widow what she wants just to get her off his docket.⁴ So maybe the younger son's losses really are just material. That, and the time he spent wandering around the far-off land and spending his father's money was, as his brother suggests, well and truly wasted.

³ Andrew McGowan, "The Prodigal Father and the Lost Son." <https://abcmcg.substack.com/p/the-prodigal-father-and-the-lost-son> [accessed March 25, 2024].

⁴ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories By Jesus*, 58.

We've all been in one of these characters' shoes at some point or another. That's what makes this parable so compelling. I would bet that we have all squandered money, material goods, or love that were given. We have all felt excluded or marginalized. And many of us have probably chased after someone else's affection without knowing if it will ever be returned. As we re-tell this story, it's easy to give in to the temptation to make it an allegory about ourselves, precisely because we all want badly for "someone - God - [to] leave the threshold to come find us when we are lost or [to] invite us into the party in the midst of our fear of being left out."⁵ Let's instead try to let it stand as it is: A story that Jesus tells to a group of critics to try to remind them that God wants everyone, not just the ones whom said critics think should be included.

Jesus ends the parable more or less without giving the characters themselves a great deal of closure. Tying up those loose ends is a task for our imaginations. I wonder: If you were talking to the elder son, what would you say to him? How would you reassure him that his younger brother leaving home, with his share of the family's fortune clanking in his pockets, and then turning up out of the blue both broke and hungry, had no bearing him, in the present or the future? And in his shoes, how would you deal with the fear of being left out, and struggling to trust that father's words, "All that is mine is yours" are the truth? If you were the younger brother, would you make good on your promise to stick around and work like the rest of the household staff? And if you were the father, how would you treat both sons going forward?

⁵ Amanda Brobst-Renaud, "Commentary on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-151-3-11b-32-4> [accessed March 24, 2025].