

Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

March 14, 2010

The Rev. Dave Duggins

Over two thousand years ago Jesus was denounced by a bunch of religious leaders because of his habit of associating with sinful and disreputable people. He responded with three parables—short stories that illustrated a religious lesson while subtly highlighting the hypocrisy of his hosts.

Let's look at the context of the encounter and the parables Jesus used. One Sabbath day Jesus was invited to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were religious teachers in the Jewish community. They held strictly to the torah and were outwardly moral representatives of the common people. Throughout the New Testament Jesus constantly scolds them because of their rigid interpretation of the law and their failure to recognize his mission.¹

So, he knew they were waiting to ambush him. He knew they wanted to catch him doing something against the law so that they could break him and his hold on the people. He heard the Pharisees murmur and complain among themselves "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them."² In response, Jesus, being the polite dinner guest his mama raised him to be, had some good stories and he told three of them.

In the first story a shepherd leaves ninety-nine of his sheep in the wilderness to go look for one who is lost.³ In the second story a woman loses a coin and turns the house upside down looking for it. When she finds it she calls for her friends to rejoice with her.⁴ And finally, in the longest parable in the Bible, Jesus told a story about a man that had two sons. The younger son chafed at being in his father's house and wanted to be out on his own. In his youthful immaturity and rebelliousness he asked for an early division of his father's estate. Once his share is within his grasp the foolish young son blows it all on high living in the low life. Soon the he has lost everything and is reduced to tending a heard of pigs in a foreign country. Now, for Jews, pigs are unclean animals, untouchable animals. So when the son is reduced to tending to pigs and even envies them for their food you know he has sunk to rock bottom. Finally the young man comes to his senses and returns to his father to ask for forgiveness.⁵

All of these stories have several common threads: Each story show values that were directly aligned with actions that God approves. Each of the main characters in the story has lost something: a sheep, a coin or a son. Two of the main characters look for that which was lost and the third one, the father of the lost son, waits patiently for his return. The coin and the lost sheep are found and the prodigal son returns to his father's house.

Quick—let's call all our friends—kill the fatted calf—stoke up the barbecue pit and break out the best wine and beer. Let the celebration begin because that which was lost has now been found!

It's not hard for **us** to grasp the essence of these stories. But the arrogant Pharisees missed the point and followed their own agenda of accusing Jesus of consorting with all the low life tax collectors, grifters, con artists, adulterers, thieves and prostitutes!

¹ "Pharisee" OrthoWiki <http://en.orthodoxwiki.org/Pharisee>

² Lk. 14:1

³ Lk. 15:4-7

⁴ Lk. 15:8:10

⁵ Lk. 15:11-32

Jesus said “guilty as charged! You’re right! I do hang out with sinners because i want to help them change their ways and find a path back to God. After all it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”⁶

There’s another reason why Jesus used these parables—he wanted to poke the Pharisee’s frog. Think about the story of the prodigal son again. Now visualize the older son as an analogy of the Pharisees. In his self-righteousness the older son, and by extension the Pharisees, have forgotten how God rejoices at the return of sinners. Both the resentful older son and the hypocritical Pharisees reflect the bitterness and self-righteousness that blinds them to the treasure of a good and constant relationship with the father.

Using this subtle comparison Jesus points out that it’s those people who think they’re not sinners who are the ones most in need of repentance. So you can see why these stories resonate so strongly with us just as they did for past generations. This is because all three stories emphasize a common thread of shared values.

Who here hasn’t lost something important and valuable—how many of you have experienced some kind of loss? Even if it is just a set of car keys that you searched for and finally found. Oddly enough in my case, I usually find them somewhere I’ve looked several times—so, if you’ve ever lost something hold up your hand.

Now, think about how much more painful would it be if the thing that was valued and lost just walked away from you? We all tend to hold on tightly to the things we treasure and we mourn when they are lost—this is a major reason why parables resonate so strongly for us—because they tug at emotions commonly held from age to age.

And while it’s true that some values remains relevant across time it’s also true that it is our generational fate to relearn true principles—and that is the background of today’s lesson. There is a spider’s web of interconnectedness in life that binds together whole generations of knowledge and wisdom and experience. And when we get caught in our own individual moral web, its human nature to struggle against the rational inevitability of acknowledging what is true.

The moral values in Jesus’ parables aren’t new. And they aren’t just metaphors used to prop up or illustrate a story. Throughout the course of both Hebrew and Christian biblical history God has been actively and deliberately guiding people to him. God created us and loves us. A good covenant relationship between humankind and God has always been His goal. The covenant idea is that God makes and keeps promises with us.⁷ It started early in the first book of Genesis with the covenant between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden.⁸ After Adam, God made covenants with Abraham, Moses and David.

But for us, keeping promises was, and still is, the hardest part of the bargain. Time and time again the Hebrew people broke every covenant they ever made with God. And every time mankind broke the covenant, God made the first move to recall us into a new relationship and start all over again.

This pattern happened so often that biblical writers noted it and named it in the book of Leviticus. We know it as “the Deuteronomic Cycle of History”. Here’s how that cycle rolls in

⁶ Lk. 5:32

⁷ “*Old Testament Covenant Theology.*” *Four lectures by the Rev. J.A. Motyer, B.D., M.A.* Principal of Trinity College, Bristol. http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_otcovenant_motyer.html

⁸ Gen. 2:16-17

our lives...first God calls us into relationship...then we fall into sin...next, and following in turn is punishment, repentance and restoration.⁹

Restoration has come down to us in the form of reconciliation—important during this Lenten season and mentioned also in today’s psalm:

"Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit."¹⁰

Reconciliation is also an important part of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians *"in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."¹¹* So, how does all this stuff about the old testament, covenants, reconciliation and the Deuteronomic Cycle of History relate to us and today’s gospel?

When I was in discernment for ordination one of the questions my spiritual advisor would constantly and consistently ask was: *"Dave, where are **you** in this story?"*

Now it’s my turn to ask you to reflect in the same way. Where are **you** in these parables? Are you the prodigal...are you one of the Pharisees...one of the rejoicing servants? Maybe your life has bottomed out spiritually or morally and you see yourself as one of the lost sheep.

Sometimes I see myself through Paul’s dark glass. When he looked back over his shoulder as he neared the end of his life he said: *"Christ came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief."¹²* Maybe that’s why the story of the prodigal son resonates so strongly for me because I have walked a long road in many pairs of prodigal shoes.

Thank God for the grace and redemption that calls all of us here today. Because we know through the telling and retelling of Jesus’ parables and through the hard experiences of life that falling short of the mark is part of our human condition

John Newton knew about falling short of the mark. He also knew about grace and redemption. Who is John Newton, no, he’s not fig’s brother. John Newton wrote perhaps the most famous of all our hymns. One estimate says that it is performed about 10 million times every year. This famous hymn is newton’s spiritual autobiography and we know it as *"Amazing Grace."*

I was lost, but now I’m found. Was blind but now I see. And so as we reflect on our brokenness during this Lenten season, we know we are not the people we should be. But there is always the comforting reassurance of redemption. When we are lost God is going to come looking for us—anxious to renew the covenant and buff up our relationship so that we can in fact become the person—the people that God wants us to be. And like the lost sheep, or the lost coin or a prodigal son all we need to do is allow ourselves to be found. *Amen*

⁹ *"Law and Life: The Interpretation of Leviticus 18:5 in Early Judaism and in Paul."* Preston M. Sprinkle
http://books.google.com/books?id=BK8pNEKZgXkC&pg=PA79&lpg=PA79&dq=DEUTERONOMIC+CYCLE&source=bl&ots=GHAa9Dq5TK&sig=J_4ybxS2daMs0fowu-IFvOGAnrs&hl=en&ei=oQ58S9yCGYHuM5DjxZEF&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CAwQ6AEwAjgK#v=onepage&q=DEUTERONOMIC%20CYCLE&f=false

¹⁰ Psalm 32:1-2

¹¹ 2 Cor. 5:19

¹² 1 Tim. 1:15