

“Be glad and rejoice in the Lord;  
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.” AMEN!

Today is one of those days when  
the scripture lessons give so much  
to talk about and learn from.

Even if we only focus on the Parable of  
the Prodigal Son, a preacher can catalog  
the important parts and each one can  
be its own sermon.

Each symbol means something:

2 sons harken back to Cain and Abel’s sibling rivalry;  
the younger asks for inheritance;

the father gives it and the irresponsible son  
spirals into depravity.

There’s the coming to his senses;  
the planned speech asking for forgiveness and  
the shameful, running father  
who embraces the son before he can  
give his planned speech.

Shameful because elders just didn’t run  
in the culture of those days.

There's the planned celebration and  
the older son's return to the narrative.

He, the loyal one, is understandably angry...  
wondering if he's appreciated and we hear  
his plea to the father for a tangible  
recognition of love.

The parable ends without the  
most important question unanswered.

Will the older son celebrate?  
Is he able to rejoice?

And that's the question I wish we  
knew the answer from Jesus.

Here is what we do know:

In this moment, Jesus was addressing his critics.

They were complaining about the way  
that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate meals  
with them.

They were angry!

So Jesus gathered them together and

told them three parables.

The first two happen in the gap  
that we did not read, the ones in verses 4-11a  
that are missing from the assigned section.

The two missing parables, one of the lost sheep  
and the other, the lost coin.

Knowing these three parables leads us  
to be able to understand how Jesus  
was explaining to the crowd of critics  
what God is up to and  
the human response to, well,

the human response to what God is up to!

Parable 1: The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep  
(an irresponsibly risky action) in order to find  
the one lost sheep.

When the shepherd finds it, they call  
their friends to come over and celebrate.

“Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost sheep!”

The second is about a woman who  
had 10 silver coins, but loses one of them.

They searched high and low until finally it is found.

She then called friends and neighbor to come and “Rejoice with her, for she had found the lost coin.”

The celebration will include some extravagant spending.

We are left wondering, “why do all the work finding one coin when it will cost four to throw a party?”

The third parable, the one we call the Prodigal Son, concludes also with a celebration.

A party to rejoice the “now alive” son that was dead.

Recognize how shocking it is to celebrate the return of the younger son who asked for his inheritance early and then wasted it.

Also recognize that it is an example of extravagant waste and reckless spending by the father in the parable.

So, this is the context in which the

parable of the prodigal son exists.

It is not in a vacuum but set in the midst of  
critical hearers who were angry  
that Jesus was welcoming sinners and  
eating with them. (Pause)

They were angry with Jesus before, and  
after his parables... we might be a little angry  
with Jesus, too.

Angry because they defy human logic.

Leaving 99 sheep to rescue 1?!?!

Spending so much time trying to find one coin  
and then blowing it plus 3 more  
to throw a party?!?!

And now, the disrespectful and immature son  
gets what was coming to him and it is  
the perfect time to teach him a lesson on  
how to live and steward resources

And the dad throws a lavish party  
(without a single “I told you so!”).

It’s inconceivable!

And on top of all that, dear father let’s

the older son continue to work out in  
the field while everyone else parties.

The loyal one stayed home and worked;  
he kept close to the father and never  
disobeyed a command and this is  
the thanks he gets!

Let me tell you, I'd be pissed too. (Pause)

Deep breaths... Lord have mercy on me, a sinner... :-)

How about a story?

Once, in the days of the Middle Ages some  
people began to put pressure on  
the pope in Rome saying,

“Your holiness, this is the capital of Christendom.

There ought to be only Christians here in Rome.

Let's get rid of the Jews.”

The pope thought for a minute and replied,

“I don't know, before I do anything I will  
have a theological discussion with  
the chief rabbi in Rome.

If he can say the right things  
then the Jews can stay, but if not  
I will order them to leave.”

So, the next day the rabbi came in and  
the pope dismissed the cardinals from  
the room and said to the rabbi.

“We are both lovers of God and  
we are both theologians.

Words, however, can get in the way,  
so let us communicate now with symbols  
instead of words.” The rabbi agreed.

First, the pope made a large circle with his hand  
and the rabbi responded by pointing at the pope.

They both nodded their heads.

The pope then took out two swords and  
waved them in the air.

The rabbi thought for a moment and responded  
by pointing two fingers at the pope.

They both smiled and nodded to show understanding.

Finally, the pope pulled from his desk an apple and showed it to the rabbi.

The rabbi reached into one of the pockets of his robe and pulled out a piece of matzo bread.

The pope concluded by saying,

“These are the finest statements we have ever communicated to one another.

Of course, you can stay in Rome.”

The rabbi and the pope shook hands and ended their meeting.

The pope called in his cardinals and said,

“I find no reason for any of you to fuss. I said to the rabbi, “There is one church and it encompasses the whole world.”

The rabbi said, “And you are the head of it.”

I then said to him,

“There are two swords the secular and the ecclesiastical.”



And the rabbi said, “You hold them both.”

And finally I said, “Are you one of the fools that believe the world is round?”

The rabbi said, “Of course not, it is flat.” :-)

The rabbi went home to tell his wife,  
“I don’t have the foggiest idea  
what the fuss was all about?”

I went in to see the pope and he said,

“We’ve got you surrounded.”

So I said, “We can get you, too.”

Then the pope said, “We will hack you to pieces.”

So I said, “We can poke out your eyes!”

Then he took out his lunch,  
so I took out mine. :-)

Jesus used parables to communicate  
an understanding about God in ways  
that used symbols, but symbols are  
not always clearly understood.

So let's take one word from each reading and see how they tie together what we are to learn about God this morning.

In Joshua, the word is "disgrace."

God rolled away the stone of disgrace.

The shame of God's people for being slaves.

God rolled the disgrace/shame away.

In 2nd Corinthians we find the beautiful words from Paul telling about everything God has done.

The word is "Reconciliation."

God, on God's own, of God's own will, restored and brought us back together.

Why?

Because the reconciled and restored become ambassadors for Christ.

We become what God does.

And finally, the word "prodigal."

It is not found in the text. “Prodigal” is part of  
the title of the parable,  
added years later, and not in the parable itself.

Who knows what “prodigal” means?

You’re hesitant, so was I!

So I looked it up and found I missed knowing  
what it means.

I thought it had something to do  
with lost or wandering or sinful,  
but it means “a person who

spends money recklessly or  
in extravagant ways;  
wastefully extravagant.”

It’s an adjective that can be used to describe  
the actions of the son but it can also  
be an adjective used to describe  
the actions of the father.

Stay with me a second, if you think  
I am just reaching here.

Just think, when we take all three parables  
into account we find some very reckless  
and extravagantly wasteful

heroes and heroines.

The shepherd was reckless to leave the 99  
to go and find the 1 lost sheep,  
yet he is the hero.

The woman was extravagantly wasteful  
to throw a party just because she found one of  
her lost silver coins,  
yet she is the heroine.

And then there's the father in the third parable...  
who recklessly gave inheritance to  
the young son and then was  
extravagantly wasteful to throw  
a massive celebration at his return.

The father is the hero for the  
forgiveness and grace poured out.

And that is exactly what God does.

Shepherd, woman, and father all exhibit  
attributes of who God is and what God does.

I don't think this is the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

This is the Parable of the Prodigal God.

The Parable of God's Extravagant Waste.

Poured out and lavished on people  
who are lost and hurting.

Each parable today and the red thread  
that runs through all the lessons teaches us  
about God's reckless love for all humanity.

Be mindful, though, who God is and  
what God does has nothing to do with fairness.

At least the kind of "fairness" we throw around.

Neither son really gets what they deserve  
but they both receive God's eternal grace.

The younger sinner came home and  
we are left wondering if the older sinner  
will come to the party?

Let's be assured that we too can celebrate  
who God is and what God does, and not miss  
the party.

AMEN!