

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 03/30/2025



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, March 30th

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Which brother am I?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the greatest short stories ever told. Building on the need for repentance presented in the Gospel lection last week, this Lenten story is the climax of Luke's three consecutive parables about the lost being found. It can be argued that both of the sons were prodigal, and this parable challenges us to confront the nature of our own prodigality when it comes to our inheritance as heirs of the Gospel.

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32 Commentary

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third of three parables in Luke's fifteenth chapter dealing with things that are lost. The other two are the Parable of the Lost Sheep (15:1-7) and the Parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10). A key to the interpretation of these parables is to identify where Jesus was, who was his audience and what prompted the telling.

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable:

The opening verses of the text reveal two audiences. The tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus (the lost). Jesus is criticized by the religious establishment for being too intimate with sinners (the self-righteous). Each of the parables that follow involve recovery of what was lost followed by great celebration. These parables do not simply repeat the same point. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is nuanced differently and addresses both audiences directly.

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them.

¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

The first six verses detail the rapid and unfortunate descent of the younger son as he sought nothing but the pleasures of the world – to go his own way. The situation was worsened by the famine. Just how far the younger son had fallen is evidenced by his willingness to feed pigs - an occupation degrading to a Jew (Leviticus 11:7). The

fact that he was longing to be fed with the pods the pigs ate infers he was not given any food. The pigs were thus more valuable than he was. How much further could he possibly fall?

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" Having hit rock bottom, the younger son came to his senses. While the confession he planned to make was worthy, we do not know if his motivation was nothing more than better food. The only thing Scripture reveals is "he came to himself." ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

Significantly, Jesus states the younger son "came to his father" rather than "returned home." This emphasizes the relational aspects of this narrative. It is evident the father must have hoped for his son's return and had watched for him. The compassionate welcome the father gives his son is also emphasized. For the father to pull up his robes and run to meet his son was considered a shameful act in the Middle East. One commentator likens this to the modern equivalent of a father running down the high street in his boxer shorts! The fact that the father ran to meet his unworthy son means he took the shame due to the son upon himself. The father's kiss is reminiscent of David's forgiving kiss of Absalom (II Samuel 14:33). The text reveals the son never finished his planned confession. He never said, "Treat me as one of your hired servants." We don't know if it was due to the father having forgiven his son and thus cut him off or if the son could not bring himself to utter those words.

The father then sends his servants scurrying. The best robe is a mark of position. The ring is a sign of authority (perhaps containing a seal). The shoes designated the son as a freeman. The fattened calf suggested this was a special occasion to celebrate in thanksgiving to God. All this suggests the prodigal son was reconciled back into the family. The death-life and lost-found imagery has parallels to membership in the Kingdom. Like Jesus at the start of the text, the father now sits down to eat with a sinner.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Now the parable takes an unexpected turn relative to the two earlier parables. In Hebrew storytelling the last part of the story is the main point. The focus now switches to the older brother who, in his own mind, remained faithful to the father while the younger son was "unfaithful." When he returns from working the field and hears the sounds of the celebration at the house, he learns of the significance: that his brother had returned, and his father had killed the fattened calf because he had received his brother back. Rather than be glad at the return of

his lost brother or share in his father's celebration, the self-righteous older brother is angry and refuses to go into the house. The anger of the older brother mirrors the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes.

Yet the father entreats (implores, begs) the older son to enter into the celebration but the older son protests, even refusing to accept the younger son as his own brother ("this son of yours..."). The older son likens his life with his father as service without celebration ("*...you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends*"). This imagery contrasts the self-righteous resentment which was exemplified by the Pharisees with the grace and mercy extended by the father (representing God the Father) to the younger son (representing the sinners and tax collectors). The father still does not give up on the older brother. Still calling him "son" (v. 31), "*you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*" This suggests Jesus is still inviting the Pharisees to hear the good news.

Reflection and Application

The naming of this parable as the Parable of the Prodigal Son causes us to focus our attention on the younger son. The word "prodigal" means spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant. The younger son squandered his inheritance in reckless and wasteful ways. He was more concerned about following his own plans for his life rather than the plans his father wanted for him. The older brother also squandered his inheritance, albeit in a different way. The older brother developed a hardened heart. He had become self-righteous. He thought he was better than his brother. He refused to forgive and accept his brother ("*this son of yours...*"). He became angry at his father. He revealed that he had served his father anticipating a reward rather than out of love. He presumed to tell the father who he should love. Even though his father implored him to join the celebration, the older brother turned his back on the father just as the younger son had done. I wonder who was the most miserable, the younger or the older brother? The younger son was the prodigal of the flesh, the older was the prodigal of the spirit. Imagine how this parable would result if the younger son had been met by his older brother rather than his father?

The third prodigal in this parable is the father. In the Eastern Orthodox Church this parable is known as the Parable of the Loving Father. Prodigal also means giving something on a lavish scale. The father gave away his love on a lavish scale to both of his sons, even after both behaved horribly to him.

The father in this parable represents God the Father. He gave away His love in the most radically prodigal way possible – He gave the life of His beloved Son for people who continue to reject Him for every fleshly and spiritual distraction possible. The younger son of course represents the sinners and tax collectors – the lost. The pharisees are represented by the older brother – the self-righteous. They grumble about Jesus spending time with the lost. When we try to see ourselves in this parable, which son do we most relate to? Perhaps we can relate to both? At one time we were lost and can relate to the younger son. Yet after a life in the church, we may begin to feel more like the older brother. We resent it when the church seeks to welcome the younger son at what we perceive is against our interests. Perhaps times like this reveal the judgmental nature of our heart and how we really feel about those represented by the younger brother. Perhaps we have forgotten the notion of grace. Maybe we think we earned such grace through our own efforts. Our father bids us to rejoice and join Him in the celebration yet our hardened hearts cause us to turn away. Why do we worry? Do we really think there is not enough of the Father's love to go around? While we may go through life shifting between the younger and older brother, this parable also tells us how to live – we should seek to emulate the father in this parable and be prodigal with our love with all those we encounter along the way.