



Fourth Sunday in Lent

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 27 March 2022

READINGS

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Parable of the lost son and the loving father

Of all the parables that Jesus spoke, I think this one featuring the prodigal son may be the most touching and best remembered of all. As we read the account, we can't help but be captured by the story of a father's love for his wayward son.

Prodigal definition - "Prodigal" means being wastefully extravagant. In this story the man's son recklessly and wastefully spends his inheritance. In the context of this famous parable, the prodigal son has also come to mean someone who is spiritually lost and someone who has returned after an absence.

What is commonly understood: God loves us.

When we understand that a parable is an imaginary story meant to illustrate a spiritual point, we can quickly see that Jesus is using this account to teach us of God's love for each of us. And while we are all sinners, as was the prodigal son, it is heart-warming, comforting and, yes, almost incomprehensible that God is willing to accept us back, given the mistakes we have made. This overview of the parable is well-known, and we are deeply moved by this understanding. But is there something more to this story?

What isn't commonly understood: God wants us to repent

Many people read right over the response God wants us to have to this parable. Throughout the Bible we see that God desires for us to repent and be reconciled to Him. Today, this message is understood in the context of the meaning of Lent: a time of deepening in prayer, exercising the discipline of fasting, and sharing our resources with the less fortunate.

The background of the parable of the prodigal son

Considering the background of a biblical passage often helps us to better understand its meaning, and this is indeed the case with this parable. The setting is provided in Luke 15:1-2, where we find the Pharisees and scribes mocking Jesus for receiving and eating with sinners. These Jewish religious leaders of the first century did not think it was appropriate for a godly person to interact in such ways with those who were deemed ungodly. This accusation by the Pharisees and scribes set the stage for three parables (the third being the one with the prodigal son) in which Jesus taught these Jewish authorities and us today how God deals with those who are considered sinners.

Sometimes important principles are repeated in the Bible for emphasis. Such was the case when Jesus three times implored Peter to feed His sheep (John 21:17). In response to the chiding from the Pharisees and scribes recorded in Luke 15:1-2, Jesus spoke three parables that emphasized His response. The first parable was about a lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7). In this story, the shepherd had 100 sheep. When one became lost, he left the 99 to search for the errant sheep. After finding it and bringing it home, he rejoiced with his friends and neighbours.

The second parable is that of a woman losing one of 10 silver coins. The woman lights a lamp and sweeps her house as she carefully searches for the missing coin. After finding it, she also rejoices with her friends and neighbours (Luke 15:8-10).

Similarities of the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son. Note the common theme of all three parables. Whether it was a lost sheep, a lost coin or a lost son, there is rejoicing when that which was lost is recovered. All three of the parables in Luke 15 also answer the question raised by the Jewish authorities and epitomized by the older brother in the third parable—whether it was appropriate for Jesus to care about and even mingle with sinners. The parables show that God does care about humanity and rejoices when people are rescued from trouble. And so should we.

What is the cause for celebration and acceptance?

While many have noted that the parable of the prodigal son and the two parables preceding it in Luke 15 all point toward God's love for humankind, many have missed the teaching within them that is the basis for God's celebration. After He spoke the parable of the lost sheep, notice Jesus' explanation: "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance" (verse 7). And after speaking the parable of the lost coin, Jesus said: "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (verse 10). This rejoicing that God and the angels desire to do is based on repentance.

Continuing the theme of repentance, notice what the returning prodigal son said to his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son" (verse 21). The rejoicing that God the Father and the angelic hosts desire to do is predicated upon repentance. The father's love. It is interesting to note that the father appears to be eagerly watching for and anticipating his son's return. As the text puts it: "But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him" (verse 20).

Repentance: a central tenet of Christ's teaching

Jesus' emphasis on repentance was not a new subject for Him to address in these parables. He often spoke of the need for us to repent. When He began His public ministry, Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 4:17, emphasis added throughout). Summarizing four major elements of Christ's teaching, Mark recorded Jesus telling people: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Because repentance is such an important subject for all who wish to be part of God's eternal family, it is not surprising that Jesus included this teaching in the parable of the prodigal son and in the two parables that precede it in Luke 15.

Other titles of the parable

When it comes to the various names that have been given to Jesus' parables, we note that they are not necessarily so designated by Christ. The Bible doesn't specifically give us names for the parables. We human beings have come up with names to help us identify and remember them. The parable of the prodigal son is not a bad name, for it does assist us in remembering Christ's teaching. But this parable could have been titled differently. For example, it could be called the parable of the lost son. Or, as Expositor's Bible Commentary states, "We call it the parable of the Prodigal Son; it might with equal propriety be called the Parable of the Bereaved Father, for the whole story crystallizes about that name, repeating it, in one form or another, no less than twelve times."

Jesus said that He came to reveal the Father (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22), and the parable of the prodigal son surely does this. This is really a story about God. God is present in places and relationships where love is freely given. God is present in environments where love is so abundant that no one hesitates for fear of love's absence. God is present where love is lavish.

The image of God in the story is of God as loving Parent. This is a good image for those who have experienced unconditional, freely given love from a father or mother. But for some who have not experienced this kind of love from a parent, the image is obscured. It is very hard to imagine something that has not been seen. Some have experienced unconditional, freely given, lavish love from friends or from a spouse. This is God's next attempt to be present in lives. God will go to amazing amounts of effort to embrace us. The loving Parent ran to the Prodigal when he saw him far away.

This is a story about God's love. It is also a story about us. All of us are either the Prodigal or the Older Brother. Some of us are a mix of both. The issue for us is, do we know about God's freely-given, environment of unrestrained, unconditional love? Can we see it?

The Prodigal "came to himself." We are called to "come to ourselves." This means repentance. Repentance is an experience of relief, release and remorse. Relief because we realize peace and joy rather than conflict and apathy. Release because we realize freedom rather than captivity. Remorse because we accept and realize our personal responsibility for what has been sinful and sometimes, stupid in our lives.

Perhaps the most forceful image is that of being lost and then found. Is it any wonder that we love to sing of it in "Amazing Grace"? Is it any wonder that at funerals we hear of this sense of being lost and found again as we bid farewell to our loved ones? Regardless of what you think of yourself, you are God's beloved child and God embraces you. Be reconciled to God. Accept that you are loved. Let yourself be welcomed home, and welcome all the strays back into the fold.

God loves us – fiercely, vulnerably, courageously...and unendingly. Whether we have wasted opportunity after opportunity or have been quietly working away faithfully and wondering when we'll be noticed, God loves us.

So, if you are a Prodigal, go home! If you are an Older Brother, open your eyes! If you are a mix of the two, go home with your eyes open!