

The Parable of the Lost Son and His Brother  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C March 30, 2025  
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Good morning, friends. Flowers are starting to bloom, trees are budding, and the birds are singing. It's Spring on Maryland's gorgeous Eastern Shore, and what a treat this is! We're also quickly approaching Easter, which we'll celebrate on April 20. In the meantime, we continue our journey through Lent.

Last week, we examined the parable of the barren fig tree, which reminded us that we either need to repent and bear fruit, or perish. This week, we will explore another parable from Luke's Gospel, the parable of the lost son, which is often called the prodigal and his older brother. This is the final parable in Luke 15, which begins with the parable of the lost sheep and moves to the parable of the lost coin, neither of which we will discuss, before reading about a landowner's lost younger son. Actually, as we will see, both sons are lost, though in different ways. And as was true of the sheep that was found and the coin that the homemaker discovered, a party marked the safe return of the sheep, the coin, and also the son who had left the family farm and the caring eye of his loving Father to go to a distant country.

As we begin, let me say that when we're dealing with a Bible story as familiar as this one is, it's sometimes difficult for us to concentrate. We think we know the plot, characters, and actions very well. And, truth be told, we do. But I've learned over the years that there are always new shades of meaning to be discovered, and sometimes very new ways of looking at the story. I trust we will all keep our eyes and ears open to discern new ideas!

Our reading begins in verse 1-3 of Luke 15. In these three verses we find a brief but important introduction to the entire chapter. The stage is set as Jesus addresses "all the tax collectors and sinners" (15:1). These people are intently listening to Jesus, whereas the Pharisees and scribes, who were also present, were grumbling and complaining about how cordially Jesus treats ones they consider to be out of bounds of proper Jewish society. Keep the audience, particularly the religious folks, in mind as we proceed. You'll notice that Jesus is tailoring his message to his listeners.

Moving along to verse 11b, Jesus introduces the third parable here by saying, "There was a man who had two sons. This surely isn't an odd idea. For example, Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac; so did Jacob, whose sons were Esau and Jacob; as did a man in a parable who had two sons who he told to work in his vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). We know many families with two sons, so this seems like a very ordinary household.

The younger of the man's sons in Luke 15 wanted his share of his property before his dad died. This request may not constitute a sin, but it was highly unusual and would raise questions about this son's relationship with his father. We learn that just a few days after dad had divided his property, Junior gathered his possessions and beat a hasty departure for a "distant country" (15:13). It certainly appeared that this young man could hardly wait to get away from his family. Who knows what plans he had, but he apparently wanted to "cut loose" so he could engage in dissolute living. The Greek word used here (*asotos*) refers to someone who lives without any self control. This would be a very different story if the younger son had exercised some good judgment as an adult. But clearly he did not. By his actions, he dug himself into a hole of

financial poverty and near starvation. It's important to note, though, that the meaning of the Greek word does not suggest wild sexual behavior, even though his older brother later draws that conclusion (15:30).

We can just imagine Junior living the good life. With his wealth, he is likely able to attract lots of friends. He probably treats to dinner and drinks. People may be fawning all over him as long as he is their benefactor. We don't know how long this riotous living goes on, but we do know that at some point he had spent every last dime! And as his money ran out, so did the food supply! A famine hit the country where he was staying. Seems as if his new friends abandoned him. If he had no money for them, they had no time or assistance for him and were, as we might say, gone with the wind.

Just imagine yourself being alone in a foreign country You have no money, no food, and no safety net to help you get through these difficult times. Admittedly, we do have to give Junior some credit for resourcefulness. Throughout the Bible we see instances of famine, which was a common occurrence. The prodigal, who had grown up on a farm, found a farmer who would give him a job—not a good job, mind you, but a job. The farmer was clearly a Gentile, because he raised pigs. Junior was sent into a field to care for these non-Kosher animals, who would have been repulsive to him as a Jew. Soon, this younger son was so hungry that he would have gladly eaten the husks of the carob trees that were fed to the pigs. But no one offered him anything. I suppose we have to give him credit for not stealing any food.

Finally, something snaps and Junior realizes what he has done...and what he needs to do. He recalls that the workers on his father's farm have plenty of food to eat and enough to spare. To save himself from dying of starvation, the younger son hatches a plan. He will get up, go home, and repent. As he does so, he has no expectations that his father would welcome him home as a son. All he wanted was some food and a bunk where the hired hands sleep. He rehearses his speech on the way home.

But then, when he nears the house, he sees his father running toward him. This must have been quite a sight, because a dignified older man, especially one who had enough financial wherewithal to own property, didn't just gather up his robes and run like a marathoner! When he reaches his son, we see no sign of bitterness or anger. Instead, the father compassionately hugs and kisses this one who has been gone, though we don't know to where or for how long. It may be difficult for us to imagine this scene, because even when we travel a distance, we have phones and email and other ways to keep in touch. This father, however, would have had no way to know whether his son was dead or alive. All he knows at this moment is this lost son, who was presumably dead, is alive and back home. He was overcome with joy!

The son wanted to confess his unworthiness and ask for a modest place on the farm, but his father isn't listening. No, he is busy ordering his workers to get Junior the best robe and a ring. This detail is important because a signet ring belonging to his father would allow the son to conduct business in his dad's name. The son is also given sandals, another important detail. Slaves normally went around barefooted, but that would not be the case with the son of a land-owning farmer. The younger son is undoubtedly being restored to his father's household.

In addition to the robe and ring and sandals, the father orders a fatted calf to be slaughtered and prepared for a celebration. This calf would have been a choice dish, much as we might serve filet mignon or prime rib or steamed crabs. The father is doing everything that he can to let the prodigal know that he is being welcomed home and reinstated as part of the

family. As far as the father is concerned, his son who might as well have been dead, has returned home alive. It's as if he has been raised from the dead. Verse 24 reports that the celebration begins. We can imagine how joyous this party would have been.

We can also assume that everyone is happy, everyone that is except the prodigal's older brother. He hears all the festivities and asks one of the farm hands about what's going on. This slave tells him about his brother's return, and he responds with rage. Even after his father comes to him and tries to convince him to celebrate with everyone else, the older brother doesn't relent. Instead, he gives his father an earful. We can imagine the bitter tone, jealousy, and even hatred in the son's voice when he answers his father:

'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' (15:29-30).

The text doesn't give us any idea as to the father's facial expression as he hears these words. Nor does it tell us anything about his tone of voice as he replies to his son:

'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>3</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (15:31-32).

I'm certainly not a psychologist, but as I hear this interchange, it sounds as if the son has bottled up his rage for quite some time. He tries to be the "good son," dutifully doing everything his father asks, but nothing special is done for him. Moreover, he doesn't even acknowledge the prodigal as his brother, referring to him instead as "this son of yours." Blood may be said to be thicker than water, but it's clear that there is definitely bad blood here, at least as the older brother sees it.

I imagine that those of us who have had a beloved pet make a daring escape through an unlatched gate can empathize with the father's joy at the younger son's return. But I can also imagine that those of us who have siblings who seem to get away with anything while we're working hard to be the "good son or daughter" are more than a bit annoyed when that child gets something we don't think they deserve.

But as we see in the first part of this parable, the prodigal son does not get what he deserves. If he did, the father would have sent him packing. But no, even before the young man has shared his apology—or in biblical terms, repented—the father was thrilled beyond words to welcome him home. And Jesus is teaching us here that God doesn't give us what we deserve, but instead, pours out abundant love and grace on us.

Well, so much for the prodigal, but what about the older brother, the one who stood to inherit the most from his father? Remember, that he has likely had to shoulder more responsibility on the farm with his brother out of the picture. Moreover, the father likely had to sell land and/or other goods to raise enough cash to give the younger son so he could go on his merry way. I can identify with the older brother; can you? Life just doesn't see fair. Junior has been away partying, at least until his funds ran dry. It may seem that he got his comeuppance by having to work to the point of near starvation on a pig farm. But still, the older brother had no use for this layabout party boy.

Yet, if we think a bit more, we can see that the older brother didn't recognize all that he had

from his father. He was working, yes. But he was also in his father's house and in his presence. We have to wonder, though, just what kind of relationship the two had, since the father didn't realize that the son wanted some accolades for himself and a chance to entertain his friends. And we have to ask, Why didn't the older son make his wishes known?

I noted earlier that the first three verses of Luke 15 were important. And now perhaps we can make a connection. Those tax collectors and sinners who the Pharisees and scribes were grousing about bear some relation to the prodigal son. They are not living righteous lives. And yet, they are eager to be welcomed into the presence of Jesus, who is open to everyone. Conversely, the super-religious folks, the ones who should recognize and give thanks to God wherever they see him, are complaining because Jesus is trying to build a relationship with those who the righteous ones believe are not part of the kingdom of God. We have to ask, given their behavior, are the Super Saints really part of the kingdom? Do they really understand what it means to love and worship God? Or are they so busy with all their rules that they can't see what they're missing out on? Rules are necessary, but loving relationships are far superior.

Your challenge this week is to try to put yourself in this story. With whom do you identify in the parable: the father, the older son, the prodigal? With whom do you identify in the audience: the tax collectors, sinners, the Pharisees, or the scribes? Try, if you can, to envision yourself as each one of these characters. Is there one who stands out as like you? Even if you don't see yourself completely in some other characters, are there aspects of their lives that do reflect who you are? What do you learn about yourself and your relationship to Jesus by pondering these questions? How does putting yourself in other people's sandals help you to grow in your own spiritual life? Allow whatever you discern to impact your life. Love, Nan