Sermon 03-31-19

Who Is Lost (from A Jewish Point of View)?

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**Sermon Starter**

Our scripture reading this morning is the Parable of the Lost Son, or as it is commonly called, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We tend to see this as the charming tale of a loving father — a father as ideally loving as we all *ought*to be; a father who forgives his errant but repentant child, as we all, ideally, should. But it is much, much more than that, especially if we hear the parable through an imagined set of first-century ears.

**GRAPHIC: Amy-Jill Levine, a Professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Science in Nashville, TN**, describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Christian Divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt.” She says in her book, *Short Stories by Jesus* (Harper One, 2014), that the message of Jesus and the meaning of the parables need to be heard in their original context. **GRAPHIC: She states “the parables more often tease us into recognizing what we’ve already always known, and they do so by reframing our vision … they tap into our memories, our values, and our deepest longings, and so they resurrect what is very old, and very wise, and very precious. And often, very unsettling” (22-23).**

**GRAPHIC: “There was a man who had two sons” (Luke 15:11).** So begins this deceptively simple tale. If we look at it as any other story, okay, there’s a dad who had two boys. However, if we look at it as biblically literate listeners, both from old and today, we know to identify with the younger son. It is the younger son who defies the rules of this patriarchal society.

Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel. Abel, the younger, is dead for most of Genesis 4, but his is the sacrifice that is accepted. The elder, Cain, is driven from the soil, hidden from the face of God, and made a fugitive and a wanderer. Abraham had two sons, Ismael and Isaac. The younger, Isaac, the child of promise, inherits Abraham’s covenant and is revered as Israel’s second patriarch. Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, are exiled from Abraham’s camp.

Isaac has twin sons, Esau and Jacob. The younger son, Jacob, barters a bowl of soup for Esau’s birthright and then tricks his father into giving him the blessing that was rightfully Esau’s. Jacob becomes both the recipient of the vision of the ladder that extends between heaven and earth and the father of the twelve tribes that comprise the nation that bears his new name.

Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph, who Melinda preached about recently, also had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When it comes time for Jacob to bless his grandchildren, the boys are positioned by their father so that the elder, Manasseh, is on Jacob’s right and the younger, Ephraim, stands on Jacob’s left. However, Jacob crosses his hands and the younger son receives the primary blessings.

And there are more. David is the youngest of the seven sons of Jessie, Solomon is the second child born to David and Bathsheba, and the list goes on. However, this is a parable, and parables usually do not do what we might expect. When the younger son turns out not to be righteous as Abel, faithful as Isaac, clever as Jacob, strategic as David or wise as Solomon but instead an irresponsible, self-indulgent, and probably spoiled child, we are all in for a surprise (46-47).

**The Rebel Among Us**

We are usedto the notion that children rebel. We know, *now*, that adolescents, if they are properly to learn boundaries, must *have*boundaries to push against to begin with — and push they do! We are used to the idea of children leaving home at a young age to go to college or otherwise seek their fortune.

But this younger son goes beyond all that. **GRAPHIC: He asks for his share of his inheritance in advance and converts it into cash.** And although to ask for one’s share of an inheritance indicates a potential lack of wisdom, it is not a sin (47). **GRAPHIC: He apparently bails on any responsibility to care for parents in their old age, back in those days before social security, hospitals, retirement homes or even the concept of retirement.**

Let’s stop for a moment to remember the definition of prodigal. **GRAPHIC: It means spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.[[1]](#endnote-1)** Here is something that might be a bit unsettling to consider. Might the father also be prodigal in giving his younger son half of his estate? Scripture tells us, “So he divided his property between them” (v. 12). **GRAPHIC: The parable didn’t say the property was divided in the customary two-thirds to the eldest and one-third to the youngest as stated in Jewish law (Deuteronomy 21:17).[[2]](#endnote-2)** It seems dad did not listen to the wisdom of Ben Sirach. Ben wrote in the intertestamental period, between the time of the Old and New Testaments. His writings did not make it into the canon of our Bible, but his work is found in the Apocrypha. **GRAPHIC: This wise man said, “In all that you do retain control . . . When the days of your life reach their end, at the time of your death distribute your property”** (48).

The younger son packs up, cash and all, and goes off to a distant country — a country where nobody knows him and where he can get away with all kinds of things. **GRAPHIC: He apparently makes a lot of friends in that far country when he first arrives there** — the kind of friends who come easily when you show up with a lot of money **GRAPHIC: and no expectations beyond a party.** Jesus tells us, delicately, that he “... squandered his property in dissolute living.” Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher notes that prodigals destroy not only themselves, but those who enter their sphere: **GRAPHIC: “A life spent on drink and licentiousness is a menace for everyone” (50).**

Sooner than later, the money runs out — surprise, surprise. The younger son’s inheritance, half the family fortune — gone. Forever. **GRAPHIC: And the young man is forced to hire himself out tending pigs.** He’s starving. The pigs eat better than he does. No one will give him anything better — not even the “friends” he made when he first landed in that far country, flush with cash.

**He came to himself**

But then, Jesus tells us, the young man “... came to himself.” He *came to himself.* Let’s think about that for a little bit. What is this thing called “self”? What is it that he *came to,*when he “came to him*self”?* If he *came to himself*when he was down there feeding the pigs, whose *self*was it that demanded his share of the inheritance from his father, like, *right now?* Which *self* was it that took his half of the family fortune and lit out for a far country where nobody knew him? Which *self* was it that was, at least temporarily, rich and free to do whatever? He came to himself alright. He came to realize that his real problem is starvation!

A proverb from the rabbinic commentary *Leviticus Rabbah* (13.4) notes, **GRAPHIC: “When Israelites are reduced to eating carob pods, they repent.”**  The son’s comments fall in line with this idea. The young prodigal speaks of his sin and his desire for restoration to the household, although on lesser terms as a day laborer rather than a beloved son. But his rehearsed lines sound rather contrite. Thus, for many readers who, influenced by Luke, see the parable as about repenting and forgiving, Junior is understood to have repented.

Yet, first-century listeners may have not heard contrition, but conniving. The young prodigal recalls that dad still has money, and he might be able to get more. He recovers his true self and that self is one who knows that dad will do anything he asks. All his language speaks to him still viewing himself as his father’s son, even though he is talking about being treated as a hired hand. The prodigal is no more repentant, has no more change of heart, than Egypt’s rulers (53).

**Another son**

There’s another son lurking in the wings: that elder brother. He’d been working like a slave all those years — he really had. Nobody asked him to work like a slave, but he did. The younger son left, took half the property with him and blew it. He left the elder brother to care for the property and to look after dad as he got older — while the younger son was squandering half the family fortune.

Yet, it was almost as if dad *knew* that the prodigal was going to come to himself, when the time was right. **GRAPHIC: After all, on his return the father spotted him while he was still afar off.** The father had been *waiting,*watching. He *knew.* Dad welcomed him back as if nothing had happened, **GRAPHIC: put the finest robe on his back**, gave him back his credit card and threw a party. We can easily understand why the elder brother is so upset.

We do well to look at this father as a happy dad whose favorite son has returned. And we do well to notice who is not mentioned as invited to the party. “Some man had *two* sons.” Most of us, including the dad in the parable, had lost count (61). **GRAPHIC: We find at the end of the parable that the son who is in fact “lost” is the elder one** (45).

The older brother is one for whom we might feel some initial empathy. No one runs out to invite the older brother to the feast, to join the party. No one noticed that he was missing. No one ran to tell him his younger brother was home. The elder brother’s anger is not unprovoked – he has been ignored by those who are feasting and celebrating. And did you notice, that when the prodigal comes home to his “father,” the older brother approaches the “house.” Maybe elder son feels that his stake in this situation is at risk? (62).

The father is now in the role of making his family complete. He needs to return the lost to the home. He did not know until this moment that the elder was the son who was truly “lost” to him.

Once dad recognizes the elder son is the “lost” one, he seeks to make his family whole. He pleads with him. Yet, years of resentment have finally boiled over and found expression. The older son’s fidelity has been overlooked. The problem child receives more attention, more love, than the prudent and faithful one. **GRAPHIC: We can hear it in the voice of the elder brother. There is no relational language in his remarks. Instead, he distances himself from his family with words like “your son, this one”** (64).

At the end of our reading this morning we hear the father’s plea to the elder brother. It starts with “Son.” However, in the Greek, the word the father begins with is *teknon*, better translated as “child.” It is the same word Mary uses when she and Joseph find the young Jesus in the temple after desperately searching for their lost son.

The endearing word “child” beings the father’s attempt to reconcile with the older son, making an emotional appeal to reunite his divided family (67). We do not learn the outcome of the conversation, for the parable ends with these words: **GRAPHIC: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found”** (Luke 15:31-32).

There is a question as to whether the younger son was truly repentant, or if he was just like he always had been, taking advantage of his father’s love. In this household, no one has expressed sorrow at hurting one another, and no one has expressed forgiveness. When it comes to families, there are factors other than repentance and forgiveness that hold them together.

A father had two sons … we can fill in the details from our own lives as well. Instead of sons, insert daughters, or just fill in the blanks. We can see hope for the sons in Luke’s parable. They should give us hope for our own reconciliations as well, from the personal to the international. Let us consider this: **GRAPHIC: (individual slide per bullet)**

* **Recognize that the one we have lost may be right in our own household.**
* **Do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate with others; share the joy so that the others will help prevent the one who was lost from ever being lost again.**
* **Don’t wait until we receive an apology; it may never happen.**
* **Don’t wait until we can gather the ability to forgive; for we may never find it; and**
* **Don’t’ stew in our sense of being** **ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past.**

We need to count our blessings, those of our family, and those of the community in which we live. But it doesn’t end with counting. We also need to act. Finding the lost, be they people, or coins, or even sheep (the other parables in this part of Luke), will take effort. It takes work. And the outcome from our effort and work will be the potential for wholeness and joy (69-70).

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), accessed 03/04/19 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke* © copyright The William Barclay Estate, 1975, 2001 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 242. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)