

SERMON**JUNE 15, 2025**

Second Reading Luke 15: 11-24 (The Message)

11-12 Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

12-16 “So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to feel it. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corn-cobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

17-20 “That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

20-21 “When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

22-24 “But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a prize-winning heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

Sermon Title: The Good Father

“Once upon a time ... “ We hear these words, and we know we are probably going to hear a story that is a what?.... A fairy tale. Sleeping Beauty. Rapunzel.

“In a galaxy far, far away ...” We hear these words, and we shift into ... science fiction. Spaceships and lasers, strange new worlds on planets millions of miles from earth.

Every genre of story, category, has its familiar format. When we hear the familiar pattern, we prepare ourselves for listening by having located the type of story we’re about to hear – and we prepare ourselves for the familiar. Familiar opening lines also create an expectation about the story that’s going to unfold, setting up some anticipation that we know how the story is going to end. “And they lived happily ever after.” But when the pattern breaks – that’s when our ears really perk up, when we really engage our minds, and often our hearts. A twist in the story gives a whole new meaning not just to the plot line – it can give a whole new meaning to how we see ourselves.

Parables are stories – but stories meant to engage us with a lesson. And the parables of Jesus as a teaching tool are storytelling at its best. In them, we get a mental picture for the teaching provided to us. They’re artfully crafted, so that multiple meanings can often be drawn from them. They’re not meant to give easy answers. The Gospel of Mark comments after relaying one of Jesus’ many parables: “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” (Mk 4:33-34) We don’t get to hear a lot of these private explanations – none of the Gospels recorded much of them except for Luke’s retelling of the Parable of the Sower (which we’ll get to in an upcoming week...)

Maybe it’s a good thing that all of the interpretations that Jesus’ may have given to his disciples aren’t available to us. Those interpretations were for a specific set of ears in a specific context of time and place. The Gospel writers left most of the parables open ended, having the wisdom to realize the power of a great story is its openness to each reader to engage personally with them. Different audiences will hear different messages out of a well-written story. And we experience that with Jesus’ parables. The same parable can leave multiple impressions on us as we re-hear them over the course of our Christian life. Trying to reduce the parables of Jesus to a single meaning can destroy the potential to help us engage ethically with the implications of the many messages the Spirit lays on our hearts. That’s why they can still resonate with us in 2025, just like they did in first century Palestine, and to all the listeners throughout the centuries in-between.

Let's begin exploring the amazing storytelling gift of Jesus in retelling the people and events of the last parable of a trio, one that many New Testament scholars say is Jesus' masterpiece. This story begins with the line, "There was once a man who had two sons"

Just like "Once upon a time," this opening line would echo to first century Jewish listeners other stories they had heard over and over again from childhood to adulthood. There was once a man who had two sons ... Adam, the father of Cain and Abel. There was once a man who had two sons ... Abraham, father of Ishmael and Issac. There was once a man who had two sons ... Issac, father of Esau and Jacob. The story of God's people that fill the Hebrew Testament contain multiple stories of two sons. And in each, the younger son gets favor, or gets a blessing, or gains the larger share of the inheritance. Not what was expected in the patriarchal social rules of that time – the eldest should inherit the larger portion, often $\frac{2}{3}$ of the property. The first born son should be the one showered with privilege and favor, the oldest should serve as proxy in the father's place in the family hierarchy of decision making. So Jesus' listeners would have been wondering – in those stories of old, the younger son came out ahead in favor. Is this another story of a younger son that follows that same script?

And the story starts along those lines – the youngest son asks for his inheritance NOW, not after the father's death, not when the normal distribution of the land and property would be doled out. There is a bit of favor in the father's response – rather than be offended, he complies; rather than giving $\frac{1}{3}$ to the younger as might be expected, he gives half; and rather than the father shunning him for this premature request, the younger son is the one who initiates the separation from the family. For the younger son to "take his inheritance and go to a foreign land," he would have had to liquidate some of the assets of the family as a whole – their land. There were no checking and savings accounts, no stock market investments and individual retirement accounts. The wealth of a family in first century Palestine was land. So, for the younger son to take his inheritance and leave meant the selling of part of the family farm. To get cash value was to sell it outside of the family. And for the listeners Jesus was speaking to, this was the first shocking twist.

For land was not just a family legacy – it was God's gift to God's people, going back to when the Israelites came to Canaan after leaving Egypt and wandering the wilderness for 40 years. Land "flowing with milk and honey" was

God's promise, land that would move them out of the status of enslaved people and give them ownership, identity, security. When the people of Israel crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan, Joshua and his team of leaders divided up the land, and spread the families across the region, each clan taking an area, and within it dividing up the land into plots that each family could farm for their own subsistence. The Hebrew word for it was *nantahala*, "inheritance." The land, *nantahala*, was how they identified what family they were part of, and to sell off your land, your inheritance, wasn't just a rejection of the family connection it represented – it was a rejection of its original intent: a gift from God. So the selling off of the land in order to give the money it produced to the one son left the rest of the family with half of what it had before to survive – and one less worker to tend to it. This left the family in a riskier situation – less crops, less harvest to store for winter months, less surplus to sell for other needed items. The selling of part of the inheritance left the remainder of the family in a precarious financial situation.

This parable has been often titled "The Prodigal Son." The titles of various sections of the Bible were added hundreds of years later to the Scriptures – they weren't part of the original writing. So, placing the title of "Prodigal Son" over this parable was a choice at one point later in the Bible's history that shifted how this story should be interpreted. At one point, translators wanted us to focus on the younger son – his terrible choices, and his bad behavior: drinking, carousing, spending his money like it had no end. And when the money that funded the bad behavior was used up, the lesson seems to be: see the consequences of bad behavior? When you act without care or concern about others, and use your resources indiscriminately and wastefully (which is what "prodigality" means) well – then you'll be sorry. Eventually you'll come crawling back, eating crow, groveling in order to get back into favor. This story was encouraged to be seen only as an ethics question: how should we behave? That's how this story was originally interpreted to me many many years ago in my early Sunday School classes.

But most translations today use "The Parable of the Lost Son" as the title. This makes more sense – as we looked at a little earlier, this parable is the third of three stories of being lost. A lost sheep that a shepherd searches for and rejoices in reuniting with; a lost coin that a woman diligently searches for – under, behind, between – and excitedly shares her finding with others; and the story of a lost

son, told in rich detail, putting us in the midst of social and family dynamics that still feel familiar centuries later.

The Lost Sheep. The Lost Coin. And number three: The Lost Son. The pattern of threes was a common literary device, to make you look for patterns, or changes to patterns. So to follow the pattern – what does lost mean in all of these parables? What’s interesting about these stories is even using the word “lost.” Did the sheep “lose” itself? They are kinda dumb, with a tendency to wander off. But – didn’t those sent to care for the sheep lose track of it, and then have to go find it? Even though the reason for losing the sheep isn’t explored, and the shepherd doesn’t take any accountability, this parable ends in celebration.

All right, maybe the sheep lost itself. But parable two, the coin? Now, did the coin lose itself? That’s ridiculous – no, the woman lost it, by misplacing it, dropping it and not seeing where it rolled. But, in this parable she does show acknowledgement of this, when she excitedly tells her family and neighbors, “the coin that I lost has been found ...” and then celebrates with everyone.

And then the third parable. Does this son get lost? He wasn’t lost physically – he knew where he was and where he was going, which was as far from the family farm as he could go. Did he lose his moral compass? That’s what was argued when this parable was titled “The Prodigal Son.” But if we think of lost in the context of the other two parables, loss of connection, a separation from the herd, the bag with the rest of the coins, and now – the loss of the family farm, family connection, family relations. There is a lot of loss, and it's not just the younger son who experiences it. But in the face of recovery after loss, this parable does follow the pattern of the first two stories – it ends in excitement, relief, celebration. Finding something lost to you, reuniting, bringing back together. It’s always the cause for celebration.

“There was once a man who had two sons” We tend to think that this is a story about the younger son. The Prodigal. The Lost. Our minds are guided to focus on the younger son’s behavior, and interpret it exclusively as a story about asking for, and receiving forgiveness from our human point of view. But, how does it change the lens you hear the story if it were titled “The Good Father”? What if we shifted focus from the son, to the character of the Father?

The father probably anticipated that his decision to let the younger son have what he asked for could result in bad things happening. He honored the free will of the son, and said “You want it now? I’ll give you what you request.” The

son's departure created loss for the father, even the father's response upon the son's return, Jesus' story tells us "even when the son was still far away, the father saw him coming and ran to meet him." He had been looking for that child on the horizon, hoping for a reunion. Once he glimpsed him, he met him halfway and wouldn't even let him apologize – let alone grovel. He put a fine robe on him, ring on his finger, and like the first two parables of loss, planned a celebration over his return. "My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!" The father's focus isn't on scolding, punishment, or even holding him accountable. He is the father whose love is still so strong that there is no amount of rejection or bad behavior that is going to sever that love.

The good within this father is meeting up part way on the road, to welcome his own back into the flock, embrace the one that was separated and bring it back to join the others. And so we are also given in this story a father who shows amazing grace, who lets someone who deeply rejects him return to his embrace, who celebrates the reunion while leaving the wrongs behind. That's the real twist to the first half of this parable. Because we don't often get to see that in our human relationships. It's a pretty tall order. And for those who may not have been raised with a good father – it can be pretty difficult to use this example to wrap your mind around the father in this story and his response. Jesus' surprised his listeners, and left them to ponder the whys, and hows of the father's behavior. The truth is, the listeners in first century Palestine probably struggled to project themselves into this father's response. Because we still do today. It surprises us. It's unimaginable.

Interpreting this story through the lens of the father is seeing it as a story of God – and the response of the father in the story as mirroring our heavenly Father's response to us. The magnanimous forgiveness that Jesus kept telling in his teaching is God's free gift to us. In this story, Jesus paints a mental picture for us of this unconditional love. This mental picture can create a visceral, gut level connection to what Jesus is trying to convey.

What do you feel when you hear or read the first half of this story of the father with two sons? What does this story mean to you? You may still feel it as a story warning you away from certain behaviors, or the just desserts that come from those other people who break the rules and live selfishly. Focusing on the younger son can keep us from walking down a bad path in life; and, we can use it to self-justify judging others for their decisions and behaviors. But if you focus on the father – it hits a little differently. What love can possibly overcome the worst

of treatment? What kind of love keeps the door open, no matter how many years pass by, no matter how many times you wrong the other? How does it feel inside of you to focus on that part of the story? And that feeling is available to us, continuously, if we focus on the love of God. Each one of us has let God down. Looking for someone that may have done something we deem worse than us doesn't change our accountability. But each one of us has God's unconditional love, which lets us pick ourselves up, come back to the fold, try again. The love of God, our Father, is the one that doesn't let us down, doesn't reject us, doesn't leave us by the side of the road of life. The love of the Father we have as children of God, each made in God's image, is the one that never ceases.

This is only the first half of this amazing story that Jesus used to teach his disciples, and to teach each of us. We'll save the second half – the story of the other son – for another Sunday. But in the story of the man with two sons, the first half is breathtaking in the many messages we can draw from it, the ways it informs our relationship with each other, the way it informs our relationship with God. So just pause today and remind yourself on this Father's Day that you are a child of God, you are beloved, and hear the words

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind, but now I see.”

And see the Father, waiting on the road, arms held out, waiting for you to come to him. Oh, what a celebration!

Amen.