To Tell a Tale: The Prodigal Son Memory Verse: Luke 15:20 (edited)

May 26th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Luke 15:3-10

**Slide 1: Title**

Today, we are fresh off of our celebration of Pentecost, the birthday if the church, the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. We decided that we are Holy Spiritans! We live with the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. So with the help of the Spirit, this summer, we turn now to some of the most memorable and sometimes most difficult teachings of Jesus: his parables.

We are calling this series, “To Tell a Tale” because that is what a parable is…an earthly story that points out a heavenly truth. In a parable, earthy truth and heavenly truth are placed side by side and compared. The great Bible teacher Herbert Lockyer wrote, “Because of his infinity, God had to condescend to those things with which man was familiar in order to convey to man’s finite mind the sublime revelation of his will.” In other words, God’s truth is hard for us to wrap our minds around, and so boiling it down into a simply story that involves the stuff of our everyday life helps us along. And Jesus loved to teach in parables. Within the four gospels we have roughly thirty different parables presented to us…which makes for a great summer preaching series.

I think there a couple of main reasons why Jesus preferred parables: One, a story is much more memorable than simply making a statement of fact. It’s nice to be able to attach an important truth so some sort of story or character that people will relate to and remember. But, while a story is nice, there is a frustrating aspect to a parable…you have to work it out. I think this is the second reason Jesus loves to teach in this way. A story forces the listener to think, to engage. If Jesus’ listeners want to comprehend his point, they will need apply themselves, mull over his story and carefully think it through. Jesus was not into spoon feeding.

So. For us, being a couple of thousand years removed from the original context of Jesus’ stories, we are even harder-pressed to conclude his intent, but fear not! We are Holy Spiritans, and we do not analyze these stories alone. We read them under the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit as well as in community with each other and, in fact, the church throughout history!

**SLIDE2: We read them under the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit**

We can read all that others who have come before us have said. We do not read alone!

As we examine these parables, we must be careful that we land where Jesus intended. We should not make too much of them nor should we make too little of them. We should not belabor the details while missing the main point. We want to keep the main thing, the main thing.

But Jesus did not sit up late at night writing out these little stories to share with people the next day. He told these tales in response to questions or situations that would come up throughout the day. Each of these parables is told for a specific reason and to a specific audience. So to see the situation or occasion of this parable, take a look at Chapter 15:1-2 READ

**SLIDE 3: Luke 15:1-2 All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. 2 The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”**

So with all these considerations in mind, let’s take a look at what is probably Jesus’ most famous parable, the tale of the prodigal son.

And one of the first things to notice is that this story is the third part of a trilogy. Luke 15 begins with a very short story about a lost sheep, verse 8 tells the tale of a lost coin and in verse 11, the lostness theme is repeated for a third time, but also enhanced and made personal with the introduction of a son.

So this trilogy of parables is told in direct response to the Pharisees and scribes…the Jewish leaders. They want to know how Jesus can eat with sinners! This was considered unlawful because eating with sinners would rub off on you! You would be made unclean and so the Pharisees object to Jesus who was supposedly such a great teacher.

And so instead of retorting back to this complaint, instead of arguing a different viewpoint, Jesus simply starts telling a series of stories about lost things. A sheep, a coin and a son. Each story tells of a valuable item being lost, being found and each ends in a celebration of this recovery!

**SLIDE 4: A sheep, a coin and a son.**

So in the presence of the Pharisees and with all the “sinners” around, Jesus tells a tale. I want to read through the whole story and I want you to hear it as a story. Keep in mind who Jesus is speaking to, but also let the story land on you. What does this tale offer to you in your life? Are you more of a sinner or more of a Pharisee? Maybe you are more like one of the disciples standing off to the side listening in. In any case, Jesus told them this tale: READ 15:11-32

**SLIDE: Luke 15:11-32**

Chances are you have heard this story before and most likely you have already heard numerous sermons an this story before, but my goal here today is not to come up with something new to say about an old tale, I do not intend to put some new spin on it or innovate some new idea…My job this morning is to simply present to you again the magnificence of the gospel as shown in this unadorned portrait of a loving father.

The good shepherd of the first part, left the other 99 in order to track down the one missing. The sheep was worth something and representing 1% of the flock. The woman, cleaning and swept and searched and scoured her house until she found her one lost coin which made up ten percent of her whole collection.

The Father of the final story has two sons, each one standing as half, 50%, of the whole. And unlike the silly sheep who stupidly wanders off, and unlike the unconscious coin that can make no decision, this Father’s son, half of his life, chooses, by his own volition and out of his own sense of entitlement, to demand his part of the inheritance and head to Vegas. Entitled children is something I feel like I can connect with. This poor Father is being insulted and disregarded and is treated as nothing more than a source of cash. Parents, maybe you can relate…but, let us not loose the main point here….Jesus is not shedding light upon familial relationships or offering any sort of parenting advice…Don’t forget, Jesus is telling a tale about God’s disposition toward sinners!

Let me tell you, if I had some sort of substantial inheritance to give to my kids, and they wanted to cash in early and traipse off in to the sunset, I would probably respond with a very stern, “Go get a job!” But what does the Father do? He gives the boy the money and off he goes. And after a while, after blowing it all, after becoming jealous of pig, (which you could probably hear a gasp from Jesus Jewish audience), verse 17 says “He came to his senses.”

**SLIDE 9: “He came to his senses.”**

He woke up, he realized, he saw clearly…he came to his right mind. So we see sin, living in sin, persisting in sin, insisting on sin, is a form of madness. It is an insane self-delusion to think that life is going to better away from home, away from the God who created you in his very image.

My wife and I have experienced many moment s in which our kids want to shun our advice or ignore our ways…and we have told them many times, “Besides God, nobody on this earth loves you more than we do. Not your teachers, not your boss, not the people who say they are your friends…among all others, we are the ones who want what is best for you!” If we can say that to our kids in the weakness of our humanity, how much more true is it when it comes to our Heavenly Father? Who loves you more than he does?

So the prodigal snaps out of his insanity. “What am I doing? Even the lowliest slaves back home have it better than this…I’m not worthy to be a son, but maybe I can at least get job as a hired hand.” And Jesus says, “While he was still a long way off his father saw him.” In part one of the trilogy the shepherd goes out to find the sheep, in the second part the woman scours the house to find the coin and here the father remains on the lookout, vigilantly keeping an eye on the horizon for the son he dearly loves and misses. There is no traveling around trying to find the son, there is no search party organized, because remember, we are dealing with the freewill dimension of relationship. The Father cannot and will not force the son to stay. He cannot and will not manipulate the relationship. The Father values the free choice of his children. And so he lets the son go and he remains at home, but he remains there with an eye out in hopes of this son’s return.

And when that day finally arrives, the Father spots him while he is still a long way off…the old man forgets his age, he forgets his dignity and he himself runs out to meet his son. And before the young man can even get the words of his prepared apology out, the father’s love overwhelms. His embrace overpowers the guilt and shame. Jesus is clear here…the father is motivated by one thing…compassion.

**SLIDE 10: the father is motivated by one thing…compassion.**

In the Greek, “compassion” is a term that means to be moved to one’s bowels. It denotes what was understood to be the seat of the inward affections; or to be deeply affected.

The compassion of the father keeps no record of wrongs…the prodigal is welcomed as no less than a son. He is fully reinstated, and the father calls for a party to celebrate. If a found sheep and a recovered coin are reason enough to party, how much more a son who has come home. In the father’s estimation this boy was not merely lost, he was dead. And by coming home he is not only found, but made alive again. And in this story we see painting a picture of the heart of God the Father…a heart that meets us with compassion while we are still far off. A heart that breaks with anguish as he waits for our return. So the invitation is issued to all who have ears to hear: Come home! The Father is waiting, his arms open to embrace. O sinner, come to your senses and come home. To the sinners in his audience and the sinners in this audience, the message is the same: Come home! Enter into the extravagant grace of God, be reinstated as his child, no need for a prepared speech. Come prodigals, come home and return from death to life! Verse 24 makes for a very fitting end to the whole story with the sentence “So they began to celebrate.” The emotional arc of the characters has been completed and any critic of the story would be satisfied and conclude “Yes, indeed that is a great story.”

SLIDE 11: But this is not storytime with Jesus.

But this is not storytime with Jesus. This is a parable reflecting spiritual truth about God and out relationship with him, and so far Jesus has only addressed some of his gathered audience. Just as I suspect he has only addressed some of us gathered here today. Jesus’ tale continues as one more character needs to be addressed…the older brother, the faithful one, the work horse, the responsible one who honors his father, but even in his honor, even in his good behavior, he fails to share the heart of his good father. Like the Pharisees in the audience, this older son has all the appearance of purity and godliness and faithfulness. They seem to have it all together. But on the inside, they prove to be dead, with hearts far from their father. In fact, Jesus refers to these teachers as whitewashed tombs who are more concerned with the cleanliness of the outside of the cup while the actual drink contains floating flies.

The older son comes in from his duties in the fields and wonder what occasion calls for such a full-blown party. He learns from a servant about the return of his long lost brother and his reaction? Anger, distain, jealousy, an enraged sense of injustice. This older brother does not see a younger brother, he sees a sinner. He does not acknowledge the relationship these two have, he only sees the failure of actions. He is so upset by the situation that he will not even enter the house! Now who is the one who will not come home! This attitude is reflected in verse 30 when the son speaks with his Father and refers to his brother as “this son of yours.” “This son of yours” tries to deny this “brother of mine.”

So we see both brothers illustrate the universal need to repent. Repentance includes turning away from our sinful ways. Coming to our senses and making our way home. It constitutes a change in our physical actions and circumstances. Repentance also includes a turning away from a selfish disposition, coming to our senses in a different way, changing the state of our hearts from that of an embittered older brother, to that of a compassionate father.

William Arnot was a pastor in Scotland in the 1800’s summarizes this parable this way, “All the excesses of the prodigal will not shut him out of heaven, for he came repenting to his father: but all the virtues of the elder brother will not let him into heaven, for he cherished pride in his heart, and taunted his father for overlooking his worth.”

**SLIDE 12: “All the excesses of the prodigal will not shut him out of heaven, for he came repenting to his father: but all the virtues of the elder brother will not let him into heaven, for he cherished pride in his heart, and taunted his father for overlooking his worth.” William Arnot**

This brother too, needed to repent.

So whether we are far off, or we have spent our entire lives faithfully at home, the call is clear…repent. Those who are far, come home! Those who are home already, celebrate with the father with compassionate hearts! What a grace we have each been given! What a good God we get to call father! What a party that ensues! Amen!