

“Still Standing Outside”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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In our time of confession this morning we read what is usually known as The Parable of the Prodigal Son. I noticed in the description of this morning’s middle school class, it is called the Parable of the Forgiving Father. I have heard it named the Parable of the Younger Son, and alternatively, the Elder Son. Two shorter stories preceding it are known as the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin; given the three appear sequentially in Luke 15 perhaps the Parable of the Lost Son is best.

Whatever it is called, Luke offers the following as the context for Jesus sharing the three stories of the lost:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So Jesus told them this parable.

The word parable is singular, and while it likely simply references the parable of the lost sheep that follows, with Luke adding the coin and son, it gave me a different approach to work with Luke 15 as a single parable with three familiar stories.

The first is of a sheep owner who has 100 sheep, and upon noticing one is missing, leaves the other 99 to find the lost one. Once the sheep is found, there is joy. The second story is of a woman with 10 silver coins, and upon losing one, she sweeps and searches until she finds it. Once the coin is found, there is joy.

The third story is our lesson of a man with 2 sons, and while there is no search undertaken for the lost son, in returning home, he too is considered found, and there is joy. In all three stories, that joy is made manifest in a public party to which friends and neighbors are invited to celebrate. A difference with the story of the lost son is that it does not end with the party.

We now finish the third story, aware of its human factor. The unlost 99 sheep would not care about, and the unlost 9 silver coins would not be aware of, the celebrations of the found sheep and coin. Yet, the elder, unlost son has feelings, and standards. When he hears the sounds of rejoicing, he asks what is being celebrated. When told it is a party to mark his brother’s return, he refuses to join the joy, and stands outside.

The father with two sons first went out to welcome home the lost one, but never spoke directly to this wayward child. Now the father must again go out to a son, and he will speak directly with this stay at home elder child. We overhear a conversation tinged with innuendo. The elder son will speak of his sibling as “that son of yours.” The father will respond with, “this brother of yours.” There is palpable tension, but it is the same father who has gone out to both sons. Luke 15:25-32:

“Now the father’s elder son was in the field; and when this son came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He told the elder son, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in.

“His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered 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.’³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.’”

This is more than a case of every party has a pooper that’s why we invited you. I imagine the tension outside between the elder son and father the way I might if attending a gathering and noticing two people outside on the deck, having obvious “issues.” The sliding, glass door is closed, but overtones of anger confirm the visible facial expressions. It is an uncomfortable situation, and impossible to ignore even if you look away. You want to end it, but know this is not a case of just walking outside and telling a joke or handing them both a drink.

We don’t know if others, including the younger son, saw or heard the elder son and father standing outside, or sensed the tension of a conversation that centered on relationships both between a father and his sons, and those two brothers.

On my study week, I took with me a book entitled “Short Stories by Jesus – The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi.” [Levine, Amy-Jill, Short Stories by Jesus – The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi, [New York: Harper Collins, 2014] The first chapter is about the three lost stories. The book was written by Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament professor, who describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Christian divinity school in the buckle of the Bible belt.” I heard her once at a temple in Pittsburgh. She is an excellent scholar and helps us discover the meaning and sense of culture, imagery and language of Jesus’ day. Along the way she challenges some misconceptions we have created.

While these three stories in Luke 15 are often regarded within the theme of repentance, of turning from wrong way to the right path, the writer questions if this was the original intent. She has nothing against repentance, but wonders how a sheep can be repentant, much less a silver coin. So, she wonders if repentance was Jesus’ intended theme, or simply an overlay for Luke’s message, which he directly references only in the story of the lost sheep. Again, without minimizing the importance of repentance, it caused me to ponder that Jesus never put a prerequisite of repentance on those with whom he sat and ate. Or perhaps repentance is not just about sin, but involves a willingness to sit and eat with Jesus.

Amy-Jill Levine also challenged one of my favorite images in the story, that being how the father ran to greet his son pulling up his robe and exposing his legs as he did so. [Ibid., p. 60] What I learned and have shared for a number of years about this is that in Middle East culture, this would have been shameful for a man to do. This enhances the story's impact as we regard God as the running father willing to suffer humiliation out of love. It is a powerful image, but it puts God's humiliation over God's compassion. Levine suggests it might be more modern culture that has rules against running, because there are positive biblical references to running, one of the most familiar of which is Isaiah's, "*but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*" (40:31)

Yet, more provocative is the option Amy-Jill Levine poses that the lost son, the prodigal, may not truly be repentant. [Ibid., p. 57] He asked for his share of the inheritance, which being the younger brother was probably less than half. Some suggest by doing so he was essentially declaring his father to be dead. It is probably safer to think he just wanted the money to be his, and not have anyone else tell him what he could do with it. As biblical scholar Justo Gonzalez suggests, "In this context, the parable has a dimension of stewardship and accurately describes those of us who wish to manage our goods, our time, and our entire lives as if they were really and solely ours – as though they did not belong to the God whose existence we deny, if not in so many words, certainly in our management of life and its bounties." [Gonzalez, Justo, *Luke*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p. 188.] In this sense, we are invited to look at ourselves as wayward children of God, clinging to what we have as ours alone.

The elder brother's harsh accusations about his brother's behavior are probably close to being spot on. Sometimes, it seems the word "prodigal" has become a term of endearment; yet, in doing so we lose sight of the waste, recklessness and extravagance of the younger son. Unfortunately for him, it seems a recession hit just at the time he ran out of money, and there were no good jobs. We know he was in Gentile territory because he ended up feeding pigs. Then, we are told, he came to himself, saw he would be better off at home, and rehearsed a line of contrition that replaced his position in his father's household from son to that of slave.

We know the story. He returns home. The father sees him on the horizon and runs to him and embraces him. In the Rembrandt painting on the bulletin cover, we notice the father's fully extended hands of embracing compassion. The son falls to his knees and makes his pitch, but note he did not call the father, "Master," as he would if he truly regarded himself as a hired hand. He used, "Father." Was he contrite or still conniving? I don't know for sure, but that is why this story, as do those of the lost sheep and coin, center not on the one found, but the response of the finder; in all three, joy and party.

There is no acknowledgment of the son's supposed repentance. It is as if the father's call to set up the party drowned out the son's words. We sometimes like to jump ahead and appease ourselves that the next day, the father would have a sit down with the younger son. We do not know if that happened, nor are we meant to know, for Jesus means to leave us with joy and celebration.

I am reminded of a story told in a staff devotion over thirty years ago by the Director of Christian Education in the first church I served in Dayton, Ohio. She and her husband had four daughters, and the eldest was old enough to be out at night. She had a curfew that was normally observed, but one night, the curfew passed, and the counted minutes reached past an hour. At such times, there is a strange mixture of emotion, that combination of anger and fear, fear and anger, swinging back and forth. Yet, then... the key was heard opening the front door, and this mother shared the overwhelming emotion of joy and relief. Our daughter is home. For those who need to know, yes, a reprimand and likely a grounding followed, but don't run past the joy too soon. That is the joy I find in the three stories, and particularly the father's unabashedly compassionate reaction to the younger son returning home.

Yet, we still have to deal with the elder son standing outside, and the same father who welcomed home his brother now has to go out to him. Amy-Jill Levine suggests the father might have miscounted. He knew he had two sons, but thought just one was lost; perhaps, he actually had two lost sons. [Levine, *Op. Cit.*, p. 68.]

There is no question this son is the responsible one, who obeyed the rules and did his work. Many of us find ourselves sympathizing with him. We can echo his thoughts, "Isn't that always the way. The people who break the rules come back home and are welcomed with open arms. When have I ever been thanked with roasted calf and party?"

I know I've stood outside with the elder son, and even if not expressed, felt resentment festering within. The elder son not only notes how prodigal his brother has been, in the worst sense of the word, but might rightly see his sibling as once again playing their father as the fool. While he did not hear his younger brother's confession, he may well have suspected it could have sounded like contrition, but smelled like conniving. Those who know the full Rembrandt painting know that behind the father there are figures in the shadows, most likely the Scribes, the Pharisees, and the elder son. The painting seems to ask, "Will they come out of the shadows?"

Yet, again, we are called back to the message of the parable in three stories not being about the lost being repentant, but about the response when the lost are found. Can we even consider the father's priority is not whether the returning son is sincere?

The father tried to appease the elder son, assuring him of his love and that his inheritance was secure, but he also wanted to reach beyond that. He wants to bring the elder son into the joy of the lost being found. He needed the elder son to make the family whole. It is not an easy sell, but as Amy-Jill Levine writes, "when personal resentment overrides familial and cultural values, we all lose." [*Ibid.*, p. 74.] But it is hard work.

We speak of God as a God of love, a God of compassion, but we might also wonder how God could extend love and compassion and grace to those we consider to be sinful and worse, conniving. The natural tendency is for us to stay outside, and when God comes to us, we figure we can straighten out God's confusion. Then, we discover we are the ones those on the inside are watching.

The family was not whole when the younger son was lost, and the father knows it also will not be whole until the elder son will come in from the outside. The sliding, glass door needs to be opened, and sometimes I am the one who needs to come inside.