

The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

March 31, 2019

I want to start this morning by setting the scene for you. Our Gospel lesson opens with letting us know that Jesus had a large crowd of tax collectors and sinners gathering around to listen to him.

Now, I want you to note that the tax collectors are mentioned separate from the other sinners. This is done because well, nobody likes a tax collector, especially one who is a member of the local population who is collecting a tax for an occupying empire from a faraway land. So, the tax collectors were considered to be a special kind of sinner.

So we have Jesus talking to tax collectors and sinners when all of a sudden the Pharisees and scribes start complaining about how this supposed “holy man” welcomes them, and even eats with them.

A Pharisee, by the way, would have been determined in their resolution to separate themselves from any type of impurity proscribed by the laws of Moses or, more specifically, their strict interpretation of it. They seemed to have led a very “holier than thou” type of lifestyle.

But Jesus over heard this and decided to respond to it. So he changes his tactics and, instead of continuing to preach to the sinners gathered to listen to him, he begins to speak to the Pharisees and scribes instead.

He starts out by telling the parable of the lost sheep. You know, the one where the shepherd, having lost one of his sheep, leaves the other ninety-nine of his

flock behind to go and look for the lost one. When he finds it he is very happy and calls out to his friends to come and celebrate with him.

Jesus ends the parable by saying “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”

You and I know what Jesus was getting at, but picture yourself as one of the people in the crowd gathered around Jesus, perhaps as a Pharisee. You might be thinking “well ya, anybody would be happy to find a lost sheep, so what?”

In other words, I don't think they got it. So Jesus tells them another parable, the one about the lost coin.

In it, He tells about a woman who, having ten silver coins, loses one and having done so, lights a lamp and sweeps the whole house until she finds it. Upon finding it she is so happy that she calls all her friends and neighbors together to celebrate.

He ends this parable in a similar way to the first by saying “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Now, imagine those Pharisees, scribes, sinners and tax collectors. I am certain that they all could relate to the woman who lost her coin, especially the tax collectors. After all, who wouldn't search their whole house, or even their whole property, if they suddenly lost ten percent of all their money?

But I don't think that they "got it", I don't think that they fully understood what Jesus was getting at. In fact, at this point I imagine them all standing there with their mouths hanging open, scratching their heads and saying "huh".

If I were in Jesus' position I would have given up in frustration, called my friends together and tried again in the next town.

But Jesus is patient.

He didn't give up.

No, he pressed on and He told them the parable of the lost son. Commonly known to us as the prodigal son, and it happens to be the subject of our Gospel lesson this morning.

I know that all of us have heard this story many times and have heard a lot of different interpretations of it. It has been preached on from at least four different points of view, those of the younger son, the older son, the father in the story and our Father in heaven.

All four of those perspectives are incredibly important in understanding what Jesus is talking about. We need to look at every person in this story and try to understand what they might be thinking and what they are going through when these things happen in their lives.

But have you ever considered looking at it from the perspective of one of the Pharisees or scribes.

Try putting yourself in their shoes, or sandals, as the case may be.

Here you have some men who are known to be scholars of the prophets and the laws of Moses. I would imagine that they care little for the troubles of shepherds or women who have only ten silver coins in their possession. Remember, they are above all that.

The parable of the Prodigal Son, however, is pure shock and awe. It's outrageously against their culture. It would have generated a gut wrenching response from the scholars present.

The first outrage was that the younger son would be bold enough to ask his father for his inheritance when his father was still alive. The oldest son would get most of the property. Other sons would get some goods and sent out to find their own way, or they would stay and be subject to the older brother upon death of the father.

Daughters were given a dowry and married off to some other family. But this son wanted to go out and make something of his life while his father still lived. This was unusual, but even greater outrages would develop.

This boy went off to a far country. He went out and shamed his father by wasting his money on prostitutes and parties. The Pharisees would have cut off such a son forever for such an offense. In fact, when this type of thing did happen in Jesus' time, some families would actually dig a grave for the son who did this to them.

The younger son was wasting his substance with the same kind of people Jesus was keeping company with. The Pharisees would have seen justice in that this former son descended into ruin for his transgression of the family honor code. "Let him slop the pigs for a Gentile! He deserves it." The example of this boy

would serve as a warning for those who stayed home not to run off. They lost that boy, but at least the others would be safe.

Jesus then tells them that the lost son came to his senses. He was still a schemer though. He was not interested in reconciliation with his father. He may have thought his offense was too great. He was essentially being pragmatic about things.

“My father’s servants” he says “live better than this.” So he made up his mind about what he would tell his father. “Receive me as one of your hired servants” he would say.

Even here, the Pharisees might well have shaken their heads. “No! He is worthless. If he did this as a son; what would he do as a servant!” The expectation was that the father would not have even come to him but would have sent a note through a servant that he was not welcome.

It is at this point that Jesus turns the parable. The father sees his lost son coming from a distance and got up and ran to meet the boy.

Folks, Patriarchs do not run. The honor code said they remained seated and let others come to them. To run meant to tuck one’s robe in the belt. It meant exposing one’s buttocks. This was a shameful act which would have disgraced the father in front of the servants, and especially the son who stayed home.

What an outrage that the father should expose himself and run to a dirty shameful son. And then to embrace him! And then to let the son’s admission of sin and willingness to be a hired servant go seemingly unnoticed.

No, instead He gives instructions to his servants to put bring out his finest robe and to put his signet ring on his finger. I can see the smoke rising from the Pharisees and Scribes!

Imagine their faces when Jesus tells them that the special fatted calf was to be served up, the one which was usually reserved for a travelling dignitary who might chance by. It wasn't enough that the hungry boy be given a basic change of clothes, a bath, and common food for his belly. This boy was received as royalty.

The attitude of the Pharisees and Scribes are demonstrated by the other son, one of utter horror and indignation.

Even though the father had pleaded, the older son refused to keep company with this prodigal. This was a stinging rebuke of the father by this son. Such arrogance was deserving of the father's wrath. But even here, the father pleads to the son to come join the party. "I have already given you all this as your inheritance" he says. "You could have made merry with all this whenever you wanted. But shouldn't you rejoice with me that my lost son is restored?"

Apparently, the older son had heard reports of what his worthless brother had done in the far off land. He was looking at his brother in disgust for his actions.

In the same way, we often look in disgust at the world. We look at so much in that way. Perhaps with a bit of envy that we can't enjoy what others are doing? Do we sometimes see staying with the Father as an act of drudgery?

But we forget who we are. We are the heirs. We already can properly make merry and rejoice that we are His at any time.

When we look at the world, we must do it as Jesus does, with the attitude that all are brothers and sisters who need to be reconciled to the family of God.

Some of them are those who have backslid from their church family. Others have always been far off in that distant land. They are all invited to join the family.

The Pharisees should have rejoiced that tax-collectors and prostitutes were coming home and embracing them. This is what the three parables illustrate. On the one hand they illustrate Jesus' heart of compassion and mercy, and on the other the cold heart of the Pharisees and Scribes.

When we understand this, we realize we have to choose between these two attitudes. We can look down at the backsliders when they return and refuse to keep close company with them. Or we can embrace them, even if we get shamed by those who have no mercy.

I mean, if Jesus exposed his buttocks on the cross for us and received public shame, are we willing to do likewise.