
The sermon text for today is based on the Gospel, Luke Chapter 15, verses 1 – 3, 11b-32

Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

The Gospel reading today is perhaps the most well-known and favourite parable in the bible. It is even known outside of the church.

It is good for us to hear again and reflect on these favourite and well know parables. We should also consider the reason why it is set in the lectionary at this time of year and what Jesus' actual message is. Sometimes we take Jesus' words and make him say things he is not saying or highlight the wrong thing in the text. Today we are going to consider who this parable is spoken to, why Jesus spoke it to them, and what that could mean for us. But to do that we need to look at what everyone thinks this parable is about, even those who prepare the lectionary.

Let us start with some questions:

What is the heading of the parable—what does the word 'Prodigal' that mean?

It generally means spending money or using resources freely and recklessly, being wastefully extravagant.

Who is the prodigal one? We think first of the younger brother. Let's come back to that one.

What do you think this parable is about? Repentance, we might answer.

Why do you think we have this parable during Lent?

The other readings set for today including Psalm 32 are linked with the theme of repentance, as are the gospel readings over the last few weeks.

What is repentance? Being turned around — turned from our sinful selves and back to God. Trusting that we can surely take him at his promise and turn to him to receive his mercy and forgiveness for our sins.

That seems to make sense that we have today's Gospel reading during Lent, because we've always been told Lent is about repenting, and on one level it is about repenting—it is about one person living a sinful life, being brought to the realisation of his sin and returning to his father to seek forgiveness. Excellent. But is that what Jesus thinks this parable is about?

Let's see who Jesus is speaking to:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable” (Luke 15:1-3).

Who is Jesus speaking to? The Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders, those who esteemed their positions or places above others in God’s people of that time.

What is their complaint? That Jesus is eating with sinners, tax collectors and sinners. Why is this a problem? This is a problem because of the holiness code found in Leviticus and its expansion in other writings. Those who were entering the temple were required to be clean therefore their attitude was, ‘we avoid the sinners in case we get caught up in their sin’. It is because, in their view, God didn’t want sinners, he wanted the so-called ‘good people’ and they saw themselves as ‘the good people’. That’s how they understood God’s law—it showed them how to be good, and they were very good at presenting with a righteous exterior.

Today’s text is the last of three consecutive parables in Luke 15. In these parables, Jesus says things like:

(In verses 6–7) “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

(In verses 9–10) “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

(In verse 32 of today’s text): “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

So what does Jesus think about this parable, and the other parables? They are about the Kingdom of heaven rejoicing over people being saved.

So why has Jesus told the parables?

Let’s look at the older brother in this parable and see what he does because that is the clue to what this parable is about.

Put yourself in the shoes of the older brother. Imagine your father gives half the farm to you and half to a sibling. Your sibling promptly sells his half, then he heads off on a round-the-world trip and spends all his money going to theme parks, casinos, gambling and who knows what else and suddenly he has no money. How might he feel?

How would you expect your father to react?

In the parable in today's text Jesus says:

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' " (Verses 25-32).

If you were the older brother, how would you feel when your younger brother comes home, and is welcomed back?

Now to whom is Jesus speaking? Pharisees and scribes, those seeing themselves above others?

What were they complaining about? Jesus welcoming sinners!

Who do you think Jesus wants them to identify with in the parable? The older son!

What does Jesus want them to learn from these 3 parables? God loves it when people return to him and all those that love God should also celebrate when sinners are saved!

Now I want to pick up again on the word prodigal. What did it mean? Spending money or using resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.

In the first parable, about the sheep, the shepherd leaves 99 sheep and to find only one lost one. The 99 could have been killed, or injured, or wandered off themselves.

In the second parable the woman spends all her time looking for one coin, sweeping, cleaning, searching.

In the third parable the father, first divides the inheritance even when faced with the rebellious attitude of his own son, then spends plenty of money on a party, including killing the best calf on the farm to eat, plus he puts the best robe and a ring on the hand of his younger son and shoes on his feet.

The shepherd and the woman with their neighbours demonstrate the heavenly joy shared by angels, the father represents God. He is the prodigal one who spends everything just to find one sinner.

He sends prophets, and angels to save people in trouble, he chooses Abraham and his descendants to follow him, he sends his very own Son...to be killed, to be nailed to a cross in our place, and in the place of all people, even those who reject him. God is the extravagant one who it seems freely and recklessly gives, even the life of His own, fully obedient, unconditionally loving, whole-heartedly forgiving Son. Why? Because that is the price our loving heavenly Father placed on each and every one of us. That is how God brings repentance.

Now let us get back to that older brother, representing the Pharisees and scribes. Why don't they want to celebrate when people are saved?

They want God all to themselves...

They are offended because it seems God loves these people that don't ever do anything right while they have tried so hard to be righteous...

Those who have wasted their money on things that are sinful are undeserving...

Not like them who have performed so righteously!

What does this mean for us? It is easy to think that we are the younger brother, the sinner and that is true. But how often are we more like the older brother, refusing to share Jesus with others because we want him to ourselves and think they don't deserve him?

How often do we fail to celebrate when people are turned back to God when they have turned away or never known him?

How often do we think Jesus is just for us because of our so-called goodness, and not for other people outside of our circles?

Nobody is righteous in God's sight by their own strength or qualities. Thanks be to God then, that he freely chases after us to lavish his grace, favour and blessing upon us in Christ, and he does the same for all sinners. He wants us to celebrate with him whenever a sinner is brought to repentance.

God chases after sinners, so that he can bring them to himself and celebrate that they are his. He says of these sinners; It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" Luke 15:32.

Amen