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Lent 4C
Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 5:1-3, 11b-32

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Parables don't tell us what to do or how to behave, they tell us something of the nature of God.

It's important to remember this as we read again one of the most well-known parables, about a father and his two sons.

But just as important, is paying attention to the story that's not included today. Our Gospel begins with Luke chapter 15, verses 1-3 – and then skips to verse 11b. What are we missing?

So Jesus told them this parable.

Verse 3 is a bit of a misnomer, as it leads into Jesus actually telling three parables: first the parable of the Good Shepherd and the lost sheep, then the parable of the woman and the lost coin, and finally parable of the loving father.

All of Luke chapter 15 is concerned with finding lost things. And all of the parables are told within the framework of the Pharisees and scribes complaining that Jesus was welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

So what do they tell us about the nature of God?

At its most basic level I believe we are being taught that God desires wholeness, and will stop at nothing to love us into it. This is what we find in today's parable.

Most commonly referred to as the parable of the Prodigal Son, it's worth it to think about who is the prodigal in this story. Defined as 'recklessly extravagant' it could apply to the son who squandered his inheritance – but it could just as equally, and perhaps even more so, apply to the father who seems just as free and wasteful in lavishing his wealth on a lost son who returns in shame.

But back to the beginning of the story. The younger son manipulated his father into dividing his estate and giving him his portion. In the mores of the time, the older brother would have received 2/3 of the estate upon the father's death, with the rest divided between the other heirs, in this case just one. In asking for his share early, the younger son essentially said to his father 'you are dead to me.' Think on that, knowing how the story ends...

So taking his share, the son left, and before long lost all that he had been given. When a severe famine hit the land, and with nothing and no one to rely on, the son, in desperation, began to consider returning home and asking his father to hire him as a farm worker, for at least then he would not starve.

We have the sense that rather than sincere repentance, this son is acting out of calculated self-interest – not unlike when he asked for his portion of his father's estate in the first place.

And yet, when he approaches his father's home, with the dust rising up from his steps behind him, he is greeted with reckless, unbounded love.

The father, who seemingly was searching the road for his return, sees him far off and runs to him in compassion. The son barely has a chance to blurt out his 'apology' before the father is ordering the servants to clothe him finely and prepare a feast for a celebration. Extravagant indeed – a sign of God's mercy, which is beyond our human capacity to understand.

If the story faded to black there it would be easy – but it wouldn't be a parable. It would be a story that tells us something about ourselves, not about God. But the story doesn't end there.

Because of course, there is another son – the faithful son who remained with his father.

When he returns from the fields to the raucous noise of a party in full swing he is confused, until that is, he hears why there is a feast – and then he is full of self-righteous anger and refuses to join the celebration.

We can almost hear the echo of the Pharisees and scribes, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*"

The father comes out to him, much as he did for his other son, with arms extended in love. This son too must say his piece, a lament for years of working hard, being faithful, and not feeling recognized.

But the father's response, his plea to get his son to come and join the feast, tells us all we need to know about God's desire for wholeness: *"Son, you are always with me, all that is mine is yours. 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."*

For there to be wholeness the lost must be found – **and** the righteous must rejoice.

One biblical scholar put it this way: The parable aims not at calling the 'sinners' to repentance but at calling the 'righteous' to join the celebration. Whether one will join the celebration is all important because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy. Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude themselves from God's grace.

How easy it is for us to accept God's mercy for ourselves, and how hard it is to rejoice in God's mercy for others with whom we find fault.

How often in our lives does a resentful spirit keep us from celebrating God's grace to others, and therefore deny it for ourselves as well?

How often are we too self-righteous to share in the joy, join the party, and be with God?

It is our inability to let go of our false security of righteousness and join in the mercy and grace of God that is the ultimate 'lostness.'

Remembering the parable to the Good Shepherd and the lost sheep, if one sheep is with the shepherd and the ninety-nine aren't, who's really the stray?¹

As Jesus taught the Pharisees, just because you belong to what appears to be the right group doesn't mean you're found. It is our response to the grace and mercy of God, not only to ourselves but to others, that finds us and brings us into the fold.

The searching in the three parables Jesus tells in Luke 15 are about restoring the fold to 100, the coins to 10, and making the family whole again. As followers of Christ we are called to join in the searching for the 'lost' because we are incomplete without them – the searching makes us whole.

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We are deep in Lent. The shadow of the cross falls across our shoulders. In this season of repentance, let us take time to repent of ways we separate and divide ourselves: into the worthy and the not worthy, into the saved and the sinners, into the right and the wrong – and all the other ways we turn away from God's call to wholeness.

May the Holy Spirit in all things direct and rule our hearts, that we may rejoice in the fullness of God's mercy and grace, join in the celebration, and delight in the presence of the loving father, knowing that God seeks all of us with the promise that we all will be found.

~ AMEN ~

¹ Sarah Dylan Breuer.

