

The Story of Two Lost Sons
Sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Luke 15:1-3; 11-32
The Fourth Sunday in Lent / March 31, 2019

The parable of the prodigal son,
as this parable is often called,
may be the most beloved of all of Jesus' stories.

While perhaps the best known of Jesus' parables,
it's actually part of three parables of lost things:
We hear before today's reading from Luke about
a lost coin and a lost sheep,
and then, in a climactic conclusion,
this vivid picture of a father with a reckless,
lost younger son.

But the story includes another son.
There's a twist, and a hanging ending.
This could just as well be named not the parable
of the prodigal son, but the parable of the two
sons. The two *lost* sons.

For the son who stayed home,
doing his duty to Father and abiding by the laws,
is the one who ends up, well, I'll say more in a
minute about where he ends up.

But first, there are reasons this story
so warms the heart.

Lots of us have these fears about God,
about our relationship to God,
about whether we measure up.

So we warm to knowing how eagerly God
receives the one who repents.

How he will greet the younger son,
who comes to his senses,
and turns back for home.

Jesus was thinking of those in the crowd who had
strayed and longed to come back.

They had left the traditional
morality of their hometowns.

It wasn't going like they'd thought.

Now they knew they needed help and mercy.

But the drama heightens.
For the younger son not only sins,
he disgraces his father.

In Jesus's day the inheritance laws of the oldest
son, the first-born, were clear: The eldest got a
double share of the inheritance.

And the younger son would have gotten a third.

But here he asks his father for his share—now.

To ask for it while his father was living
was like the son saying “I’m getting impatient
waiting for you *to die*. Give me my money so I
can get the heck out of this place!”

Just as bad, everyone in the community would
have been talking about it. Much of the father's
holdings would have been in real estate, and so he
had to sell some of his land. “The “for sale” sign
wouldn't sit in the yard for long,
but long enough for everyone in the town to see it.
Long enough to make for the juiciest gossip.

Like, “This father can’t keep his own son from
carving up the family farm.”

What a wounding to a father’s love.

But when the boy returns, before he can stumble
to the door and spill out his rehearsed speech,
the father already is running toward him.

In the Middle East, dignified men simply didn’t
do that. The ancient philosopher Socrates would
say, “Great men never run in public.”

But so profound was the father’s compassion,
so exuberant his joy, that he can’t *help it*.

And he gives his son
a party of, well, biblical proportions:
dancing, a band, the juiciest ribs.

No wonder we love this story of
how the lost can be found!

Anyone who has wandered and dishonored the
family name, can hope for a fresh start.
With God, there is mercy. Always, mercy.

And lots of us need to say to ourselves a great line from the poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins:

“My own heart let me have more pity on.”

Don't we need to say that to ourselves when we mentally beat ourselves up?

“My own heart let me more have pity on; let
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind. ...”

So there's good news, here. *Very* good.

But there's also a surprising layer to this story. For this parable didn't warm the hearts of the religious leaders of his day.

Author and pastor Tim Keller says that some “were not melted into tears by this story but rather they were thunderstruck, offended, infuriated. ...

For Jesus' story reveals not only the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother, it also condemns the elder brother's” self-righteousness.

That brother was dutiful but resentful.

Jesus's reason for telling this story, please remember, was the religious leaders' complaining.

The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled,
"This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them."
In their pride, they trusted in their righteousness.

So not only does Jesus have to tell a story of the wayward being found, explaining why tax collectors and other sinners could receive a place at the table, he also counters the religious leaders' conceit.

He challenges how they insulated themselves from God's grace by assuming they didn't need it. Like I said, it would be more accurate to call this a story of *two* lost sons.

The parable demonstrates two ways to be alienated from God. Two ways to experience distance and lostness.

For we now see the other son.

Yes, the "good" son!

His young brother comes back, gets the royal treatment, and we see him brother fuming.

Which helps answer a question I once heard someone raise. Rereading this parable he said he asked himself, “Why have the older son in the parable at all? Why put him in to suck the life out of the party and the story?”

But this older son, the one who served his father all these years, resembles the religious leaders who were also present and listening. The dutiful son hears the sounds of the party and “he became angry and refused to go in.”

He holds himself back from the celebration.

He’s lost, too.

He’s off, out where the drum and lyres of the party are distant strains, not because the father doesn’t want him, but because of his pride in his accomplishments

So, he complains to his father,

“Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.”
So he stands back. And we see, incredibly, the father again insulted.

In that time, at any social event, the household’s male members had to shake hands with the guests, even if they didn’t stay.

To stay aloof, to avoid the gathering, was worse than bad manners, it was a personal insult to the head of the house, and to the guests.

This older son—remember, the good son, the one who never left to go off in search of himself—is rebelling in his own way.

So those in the banquet hall now must wonder. What’s the father going to do? For the second time his response is unexpected, “his father came out and entreated him.”

Begged him.

Ah, but we don't know how this son responds. Unlike the younger son, whom we see securely back in the fold, with the older son, we don't know. Because Jesus wants us to finish the story. How would we respond?

A recent promotion by H&R Block offered walk-in customers a chance to win a drawing for a million dollars. Glen and Gloria Sims of Sewell, New Jersey, won the drawing, but when an H&R Block representative phoned them with the good news, they refused to believe it.

After several additional contacts by both mail and phone, the Sims still thought (like I would have!) it was all just a scam and hung up the phone or trashed the special notices.

Some weeks later, H&R Block called one more time to let the Sims know the deadline for accepting the prize was nearing and that the story of their refusal would appear on an upcoming episode of NBC's "Today" Show.

Finally, Mr. Sims decided to investigate further.

A few days later he appeared on the “Today” Show to tell America that he and his wife had finally gone to H&R Block to claim the million-dollar prize. Mr. Sims' final words were: “From the time this has been going on, H&R Block explained to us they really wanted a happy ending to all this, and they were ecstatic that we finally accepted the prize.”

Finally! And us?

We too can stand back, disbelieve the offer. We can forget how essential God’s forgiveness is. So we obsess about our past failings or we insist on standing on position or prestige.

But God says it’s not about us.

I said to call this the parable of two lost sons. You could also call this the parable of the Good Father.

For ultimately, it’s about an extravagantly merciful father’s invitation.

The father runs to meet his younger son,

and he goes out into the field for the older son.
In each case it's his aching for their reconciliation
with him that matters, *his* invitation.

But note: Unlike the part of the story with the
younger prodigal son, there's no resolution to this
second segment of the story.

We're left hanging.

Will the older son continue to insist that he be
recognized for his accomplishments,
continue to believe that he doesn't need mercy?

Or will he realize that he, too, needs his father's
overflowing compassion? Will he?

The more essential question for today is, will *you*?