

# Sermons from Parma Greece United Church of Christ

## **Lost and Found**

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 31, 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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## ***The Parable of the Lost Sheep***

*Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*

*So he told them this parable:*

## ***The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother***

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and 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.'" '

Flannery O'Connor was Christian novelist and short story author who died in 1964. She lived in Georgia and many of her writing reflected her Catholic faith. She also wrote of her correspondence and speaking engagements. Not long ago, found some excerpts from one of her speaking engagements that was interesting. She was asked to come and read at nearby Wesleyan College. She says:

"Week before last I went to Wesleyan and read (my story) "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."  
After it I went to one of the classes where I was asked questions. There were a couple of young teachers there and one of them, an earnest type, started asking the questions. "Miss O'Connor," he said, "why was the Misfit's hat black?"

I said most countrymen in Georgia wore black hats.

He looked pretty disappointed.

Then he said, "Miss O'Connor, the Misfit represents Christ, does he not?"

"He does not," I said.

He looked crushed.

"Well, Miss O'Connor," he said, "what is the significance of the Misfit's hat?"

I said it was to cover his head; and after that he left me alone. Anyway, that's what's happening to the teaching of literature."

Yes, and much too often it's what happens when people start interpreting the Bible. We hear the story of "the Prodigal Son" read to us and immediately, we begin to think "Okay, the father is obviously God, and the elder brother is the good guy, so, he represents the Pharisees and the scribes in verse 2, and the younger brother is a scoundrel, so, he signifies the tax collectors and sinners.

And the story is about how God loves sinners and forgives them when they repent and how the Pharisees and scribes didn't like it when Jesus showed God's love to sinners, and we shouldn't be like the elder brother – we should rejoice with God over the repentance and forgiveness of a sinner. That is, we think, the significance of the people and the happenings in this story." As Flannery O'Connor pointed out, sometimes a black hat is a black hat and sometimes a father with two sons is a father with two sons.

Let's see what happens when we take the story for what it is; a story told to a Jewish audience that was very familiar with the stories and scriptures of the Hebrew tradition. The first thing we need to realize is that there is a large gap between the first three verses about tax collectors, sinners, scribes and Pharisees; and the rest of our lesson about the lost son. In between are two other stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin. It's obvious we are intended to see these stories as all making similar points.

In the first Jesus says, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" You can imagine someone jumping up and down, waving his hand, I know the answer to that, "Nobody in his right mind, Jesus." I grew up on a farm. The goal is to protect the herd at all costs. One sheep goes off alone, you risk losing the rest on the off chance of finding the one. But Jesus' shepherd does and when he finds it, throws a big party to celebrate – probably a sheep barbecue, which sort of negates the victory.

In the second story, Jesus says, "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?" Again, after the we know an answer, someone in the crowd offers and probably not the answer Jesus was looking for. The person says, not my Mama." Her attitude would have been, "It's here somewhere, probably in the couch. It'll turn up sometime. I can't lose a day's wage looking for a coin equal to a day's wage." But the woman in Jesus' story does, and when she finds it, she throws a party to celebrate, which probably cost more than the coin she lost.

Then we come to today's story, about the lost son. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine points out that a Jewish audience hearing Jesus say, "There was a man with two sons," would immediately remember "Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel, Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, Joseph had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim." Remember also they will remember that it was the

younger son who was always the hero, “David was the youngest of seven, Solomon is the second child born to David, etc.” “All biblically literate listeners know to identify with the younger son.”

But Jesus threw them a curveball. In this story, the younger son turned “. . . out to be an irresponsible, self-indulgent, and probably indulged child. This younger son goes away, is lost the text says, then he is found, and a big party is thrown to celebrate his return home. Three lost things, three careless owners/fathers, three over the top parties, and one very unhappy elder brother.

What is the point?

Well, one thing it's not is it's not a story about repentance and forgiveness. A sheep can't repent, a coin most certainly can't repent, and a careful read of the story shows the younger son to have been more conniving than contrite. His little rehearsed speech is calculated to get him back in with Daddy more than anything else. A son can repent, but I don't think this one did.

In all three stories you have someone who has lost something so precious to them that they throw caution and good sense out the window and do everything they can to find or restore that one to themselves. Abandoning the secure sheep to hunt for the one, putting all else aside to search for the coin, and the father – the father had already lost his son when he asked to be given what was coming to him. The father gave it to him in the desperate hope that the son would see the love and not go away or at least would soon come home. And the father sat and watched, watched for the son to return.

I think the over-the-top celebrations are the key to understanding what Jesus is getting at in these stories. They are not about repentance and forgiveness; nor are they about forgiven sinners and judgmental Pharisees. They are about the immeasurable and somewhat unreasonable love that God has for all of us. Just as all three of these people felt the loss of something, they loved so keenly that they acted in ways that made no sense, business or otherwise; just so God's love is so great for all God's children that God grieves when they are lost and celebrates uproariously when they are found.

The invitation to the Elder Brother to come to the party is not an invitation to forgive his repentant sibling – it is an invitation to celebrate the fact that a man had two sons, both of whom he loved beyond reason. The Gospel for us today is this...God has many children, God loves them all with an unreasoning passion – so much so that God-in-Christ took the outrageous risk “for us and for our salvation” (Nicene Creed) of coming to live with us, and die upon a cross for us, and God will not rest until all God's children are found in him. And then – wow, what a party that will be! Amen.