

“The Party Invitation”

Growing Stories: The Parables of Jesus

Luke 15.11-32

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Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

One of the best things about Covenant Presbyterian Church is that we like to ask questions, think, and wrestle with issues of faith and life.

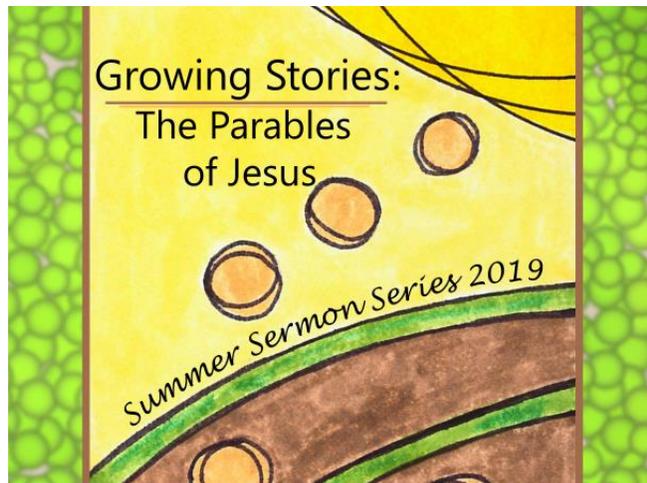
We look at the Bible not as an instruction manual or a magic answer book but as God’s authoritative witness, God’s word, which must be read in context and understood in light of other Biblical passages.

Presbyterian pastor and author Jack Haberer wrote a wonderful piece a few years ago about how Presbyterians approach the Bible. In essence he says: Read it. Study it. Contextualize it. Ponder it. Put it in action.

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/2/18/how-presbyterians-interpret-bible/>

Here at Covenant, we feel the same way, with simpler framework: Learn God’s love. Live God’s love.

For the next eight weeks, we’re going to be reflecting on the parables of Jesus in Luke’s gospel. We’re going to read, study, ponder, contextualize, and try to put them in action.



In case you’re wondering what a parable is, here’s a good definition.

Biblical scholar C.H. Dodd says that parables use common imagery in a strange way, to evoke active thought about deeper meanings. He wrote:

“At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and

leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to tease the mind into active thought.”

--CH Dodd

Today we focus on one of the most familiar parables, and you’ve already heard the first half, with the saga of the younger brother.

Our parable today is often called the Prodigal Son, with focus on the first son.

One definition of prodigal: Spending money or resources freely and recklessly.

Synonyms: irresponsible, self-indulgent, wasteful, extravagant

But really both of the sons are lost, just in different ways. Maybe this should be called the parable of the two sons.

Or maybe the parable of the Father’s love, or even the prodigal father, since his love could be described as extravagant, wasteful, excessive.

Two other notes: This is not a biblical teaching on family relationships or how to raise your kids or how to relate to your father. It’s a parable about God’s love.

Secondly, note that the parable ends with uncertainty. The older brother has a decision to make. What will he do?

Faithful church-goers have heard this parable many times, As we listen to the second half of this familiar parable and let our minds be teased into active thought:

- Perhaps you’ll hear something new today.
- Perhaps you’ll hear something that you’ve previously heard, and maybe you’ve forgotten it, or maybe you’ve ignored it.

Listen for God’s word.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your

father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.²⁹ 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.’³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³² 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.’”

So there’s a party!

Everyone’s is invited.

Will everyone come?

The younger son is ready for the party. He has accepted his invitation.

He had been foolish and selfish, going off to a faraway land, spending all his money, wasting all of his blessings. By asking for his inheritance, it’s as if he wished his father were dead.

Then he had a dramatic turnaround. Some might say he bottomed out, realizing his desperation, he got new clarity and conviction.

¹⁷ 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!’¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned



against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

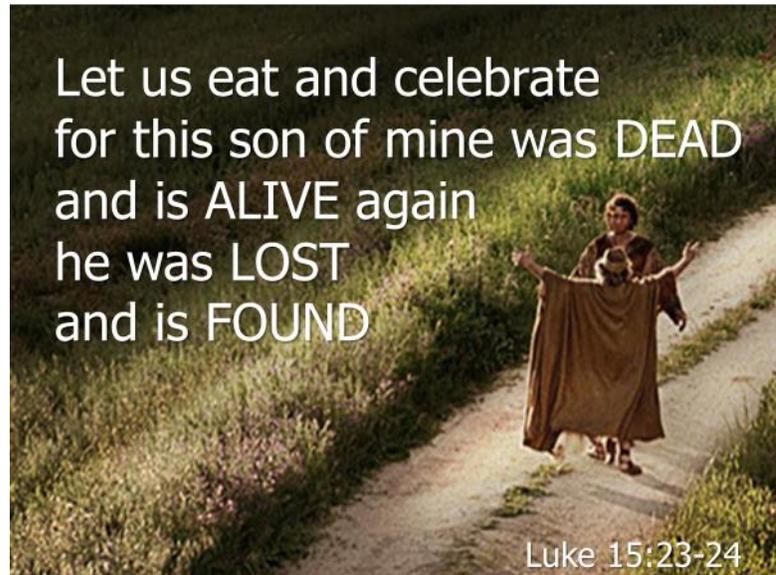
The text says that he came to himself.

It's as if he woke up and realized what was really going on and what he could do to get back on track.

With humility he acknowledged the error of his ways and came back home.

And the father welcomes him with open arms.

This scene is for some people the classic conversion moment—the time when the humiliated sinner decides to welcome the love of the father.



This scene is the inspiration for the classic gospel hymn, “Softly and Tenderly.”

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, Calling for you and for me.

See, on the portals, He's waiting and watching; Watching for you and for me.

O for the wonderful love He has promised, Promised for you and for me

Though we have sinned He has mercy and pardon, Pardon for you and for me

Come home, come home, Ye who are weary come home

Earnestly, tenderly Jesus is calling, Calling, "O sinner come home"

On Youtube I found a great rendition of this song by country music singer Alan Jackson.

Presbyterians tend to get a little uncomfortable with such emotional calls to faith. Sometimes the faith gets presented in a manipulative and unhealthy way.

But the reality is that we all have wandered away from God, in one way or another.

- Sometimes we turn our backs on those who love us
- Sometimes we waste time and money on foolish pursuits
- Sometimes we let bad habits calcify in our hearts and homes, resisting any invitation to change
- Sometimes we do things we know we shouldn't do and we keep doing them, even though we know "the thing" is causing problems for us and people around us

At the core of our Christian faith is a call to turn around, to repent, to change direction.

God calls us to "come to ourselves", to turn from sin, to wake up, to find our way back home to God's love. And God is always there, no matter where we've been or what we've done, to welcome us home.

So the younger brother comes home and is welcomed with mercy and pardon, with open arms and big celebration. The one who was lost has been found. The one who was dead is alive.

+ + +

While this dramatic and tender scene is happening, the older brother is watching it all, with growing dismay.

Perhaps representing the Pharisees, who weren't happy with Jesus welcoming the so-called sinners—the foreigners, the sick, the outcasts—the older brother is the rule-follower and he gets angry, seeing all the attention and generosity for his wayward brother. He feels unappreciated. His father comes out, begging him to come in and join the party as well.

The parable ends, and we don't know if the older brother went to the party or not.

I think looking at the context helps us reflect more deeply on this parable. Chapter 15 of Luke is sort of a lost and found chapter. Immediately preceding this parable are two other lost and found parables—the lost coin and the lost

sheep. Jeff is preaching on them next week. It's helpful to think about them all together.

The coin and the sheep are found by someone else. They have no say, no initiative, no agency.

The two sons, in contrast have a choice to make. They have a chance to change direction and come home to be found anew.

If we go too far with either parable, we run the risk of distorting their meaning.

Cheap grace is when we think our lives and choices don't matter that God will always find us and love us no matter what, like a lost sheep.

Works righteousness is when we think it all depends on us, that we have to earn our salvation, or say the right words.

What I hear in these parables is divine initiative: God reaching out to find us, to call us, to save us, to bring us back, to welcome us home.

The choice is whether or not we respond.

What holds all of these lost and found stories together is the image of celebration, a party to which we're all invited. The celebration is the new, abundant and eternal life we have as God's people.

Friends, the [communion] table is set. The feast is ready. We're invited to the celebration, today and every day.

Let us pray.....

Lost and found—Luke 15

Coin and sheep

Passive

No agency

They are found

Two sons

Active

Agency

They find themselves (or not)

Distortions: Luke 15 out of context

Coin and sheep

Cheap grace

Two sons

Works righteousness
(earning salvation)