

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

March 30, 2025

IV Lent, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

The keen-eyed among us may already have noted that today's lectionary appointment omits seven-and-a-half verses from Luke's fifteenth chapter. Those missing verses begin after the prompt in the third sentence, "So Jesus told them this parable."² In the unedited chapter, two quick parables follow as an introduction to the "Prodigal Son" narrative. You will know these shorter lessons as well as you know the longer tale we just heard.

In the first parable, Jesus asks the disciples, "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?"³ *Having been cast as the shepherds*, the disciples listen as Jesus continues, "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'"⁴ Jesus then explains the story: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."⁵

Immediately following, Jesus builds on this momentum: "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?"⁶ Once more *having been cast as the seeker*, the disciples listen as Jesus reiterates, "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."⁷

In each of these stories, Jesus connects his listeners to those who pursue what has been lost, all as a means of expressing God's care and inspiring our mercy. As we have learned over the years, Jesus also proves tricky. Rather than establishing a narrative pattern to keep, he's setting up a punchline to deliver.

The teachings' pattern draws us to the generous father in "The Prodigal Son." Through verses 23 and 24 – "let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"⁸ – this more developed parable still neatly fits the formula of "The Searching Shepherd" and "The Sweeping Woman." Jesus then pivots toward a new challenge: "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing"⁹ ... and we can feel the trouble rumble with the DJ's bass.

As this conflict approaches, first consider the family's wayward sheep.

As the younger of the two boys, he does not enjoy his brother's advantages. According to primogeniture, the younger son will receive the dregs of his father's estate, a fact never lost on anyone in the household or in their wider community. When neighbors or business partners want to curry favor with this family, they cozy themselves to the elder boy, not to the babe. When their dad chooses a companion to hop on the tractor and accompany him on a ride to the far side of their fields, he takes the eldest and leaves the younger to stay at home with his mother and sisters. Through absolutely no *fault* of his own, this younger child's prospects derive from his junior relationship to his brother.

Compare the prodigal's situation to that of the family's fair-haired child.

This oldest son enjoys all the rights, privileges, and assurances of the male firstborn. All that his father has, *is* his, or soon will be. Accordingly, the eldest is always in the know: his father whispers to him secrets about their line and dealings for that day when the father will pass away and this boy will become the story-keeper and patriarch. He has the first choice of seat at every dinner, the first choice of horse on every ride, and the first choice of date at every dance. Through absolutely no *merit* of his own, this older son's prospects boast all the enviable fortune.

Reading the younger son's actions in *this* light, perhaps he decided to leave home because he wanted to prove his own worth. Maybe he wanted to cast his own shadow, instead of living in someone else's. Maybe it was not only greed at work, but a *healthy* pride, an *admirable* courage.

Sure, it could be that he was good at all the wrong stuff growing up – hittin' fastballs and playin' pinball, rather than finishing his math homework on time – but it may just as well be that no one ever noticed if he measured at all. Rather than focusing on the superficial selfishness that accompanies the younger son's inexperience in privilege – and he is, he is inexperienced in privilege – allow his spark to preside: this younger son makes a run at it. So, he gets distracted along the way – wasn't the first, won't be the last – and he fails at self-sufficiency [there are worse things]. Even so, he doesn't come back home slinging entitlement and asking for the fatted calf; he returns begging for the pig's slop. He doesn't consider even the *possibility* of forgiveness. If he left with arrogance, he reappears with humility – and that humility makes possible a *surprising* grace, even celebration.

The camera now pans from the party in the farmhouse to the eldest in the field. For the first time in his life, the older boy's father celebrates the more vulnerable son, and the preferred child “[becomes] angry, and [refuses] to go in [the house where the party welcoming his brother was already underway]”¹⁰ ... he stomps his feet and pouts his lower lip. This child has enjoyed every advantage, every privilege, every day of his life, and though his brother's return does not threaten *anything* that is his – other than, perhaps, his family's attention for little more than a passing afternoon – his integrity, nonetheless, *crumbles*.

The parable's pivot to this older boy's reaction to his father's welcome of his younger brother challenges us to consider the nature and purpose of *our* privilege.

To live in this country in the year 2025, we count among the most fortunate humans ever to walk the earth. And I don't mean to say that we are among the top *half* of humans, or top twenty percent, top ten percent: no, we are among the impossibly most fortunate fraction of anyone who has ever drawn a breath, through somewhere between little and no merit of our own. Sure, we may have managed to avoid knocking ourselves off-track, or we might have pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps[, as the legend tells,], or we might even have taken the grand risk of moving here from a less promising land. No matter, we fall heir to the very opportunity to leverage our time and skills as an unearned advantage peculiar to this moment and place. And while surely some enjoy more than others, *unearned* remains the nature of all our privileges, at their foundation if not on their surface.

Our privileges – as those of the eldest son – are not without a purpose: namely, that as we have been blessed, God calls us to become a blessing. God has never called us or our forbearers in faith to hoard our benefits, either for ourselves alone or only for those most like us. Our opportunities equip us to share opportunity with others in this good world that God has made.

See what the eldest son fails to recognize: we always tend the fatted calf *for our brother's return*. We receive strengths of spirit and nurture them *in order* that they might benefit all people. We sew our most prized robes and stitch our sturdiest sandals to share with those born under less favored signs, strangers we may never meet.

The vulgarity and indignity of our national leaders now sound a warning for these ideals. After a short season without their power consolidated – little more than a passing afternoon – their stomping feet and pouting lips make clear their self-interested spoiling. Entitled children, they seek celebrity instead of service, recrimination and not renewal. They bully and shame, blame and steal. They gaslight, deflect, and decline responsibility for all their ill behavior.

Even so, just as each one of us has been blessed so that we might become a blessing, we *as a nation* remain *extraordinarily* blessed, and God calls our collective to the loving stewardship of our common gifts – *never* for our own sake alone, but *always* for the sake of the whole world. Short-sighted, selfish isolationism promises *disaster* – for our citizenry and for every nation, to say nothing of our souls' welfare. And while this partisan season might tempt resisters' despair or seemingly grant permission for those of goodwill to respond to fire with fire – to suspend our honorableness and allow our telos to forgive our tactics – our Gospel challenges us to assume the vulnerability of the younger son.

Though such humility might make for bad political strategy, we dare higher hopes than electoral outcomes alone. Those of us who claim a Christian conscience must now hold a mirror to ourselves, acknowledge where we have fallen short of God's dream, and repent of our complicity

in these current circumstances. *Then*, individually and collaboratively, we can act with generosity and grace.

We now inherit the task of finding a way to accept those who exclude us ... to love those who revile us ... to sweep every corner for righteousness, *believing that it's there* ... to search the distant brambles for goodness, *believing that it's there* ... to trust that by such faithfulness what seems irrevocably lost can again be found ... yes, that what seems dead might be restored to life ... and that *all* people might celebrate and rejoice in our God's Good News of blessing, mercy, and care.

Held in common by this promise, I pray;
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Luke 15:3a.

³ Luke 15:4.

⁴ Luke 15:5-6.

⁵ Luke 15:7.

⁶ Luke 15:8.

⁷ Luke 15:9-10.

⁸ Luke 15:23-24.

⁹ Luke 15:25.

¹⁰ Luke 15:28.