

Lent 4C
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
March 30, 2025

“The Lost Son”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

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: 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.”’

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This story begs the question, who was really the sorriest to see the younger son return home? The fatted calf, of course!

We’ve all heard the story of the so called “Prodigal” Son so many times that, I’m guessing it’s lost its ability to surprise us. We’ve heard preachers tell us not to be like the younger son, and not to be like the older son. And to remember that like the father, God is always waiting for us to come home. The Prodigal Son is practically synonymous with a disappointing child, who flies in the face of convention, takes all they can get from their parents, and disappears to squander it in foolish living, only to return home when they need something. We know this story. We’ve lived this story – at least one of the roles. Or we think we have.

At its core, this is a story of a man with two sons. The ancient audience to which Jesus first told this story was familiar with this template. It was familiar. Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel. Abel the younger, gave a pleasing offering to God and in a fit of jealousy, Cain slew him. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac, the younger, inherited Abraham’s covenant and is revered as Israel’s second patriarch while Ishmael and his

mother were thrown out of Abraham's household. Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob, the younger, cheated his brother out of his birthright and was granted a new name – Israel— after wrestling with the divine. He became the namesake of nation. The pattern continues throughout ancient Israel's history. Audiences knew to identify with the younger son. Jesus knew that and he exploited his audience's assumptions.

The younger son is not wise. He asks for his share of the inheritance so his father divides his estate in half, liquidates the assets, and hands him his share. He takes the money and moves to a foreign land where he blows it all foolishly. Despite his obvious love for the younger son, the father could have said no to his request for the inheritance—should have said no, but he didn't. He enabled. And the behavior of the younger son reflects poorly on his father. Famine strikes and the younger son, far from home and penniless, gets a job working for a farmer. He longs to eat the food he's feeding to the pigs, but no one offers him anything. He's starving. That's when, as the text says, "he came to himself." According to Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, "he recovers his true nature . . . and that self is one who knows that Daddy will do anything he asks."¹ He starts heading home, rehearsing his lines as he went. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you," the very same lines Pharoah told Moses to stop the plagues. The younger son has no change of heart, no more than Pharoah had, and the audience would have noted that.

Before he could get out the words, though, his father smothers him with hugs and kisses, orders that clothes and a ring be brought, that the fated fatted calf be slaughtered and prepared, and a celebration commence. Resurrection had happened. His son was dead, as he said, and was now alive. But this is still the "manipulative, pampered, and perhaps relieved kid"² that had left those long months before. The party starts, but "no one runs out to invite the older son to the feast. No one noticed he was

¹ Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, New York: Harper Collins, 2014, 53.

² Levine, 61.

missing.”³ Even we likely haven’t given him a thought since the very beginning of the story. But now all eyes are on him. His father finally realizes that it’s *this* son who is truly lost to him – the son who had stayed; who had comforted the father when the younger favorite had broken his heart; who had continued to work; and who now expresses his hurt at the affection shown his brother, but never shown to him. Knowing that without either son, his family would never be whole, the father comforts, urges, and pleads with the elder son to come inside, for the brother who was dead is now alive. “Celebration is warranted.”⁴ But we don’t know what happens. Jesus leaves it there for us to wonder.

This parable resists easy interpretation. The father for his failings cannot be a metaphor for God. The unrepentant younger son does not stand in neatly for wayward souls finding their way back to God. And the elder son is not easily written off as resentful or resistant to grace. The fact that no one in this parable expressed regret or remorse for pain caused, and no one offers words of forgiveness should be a clue that this story is not, as it is commonly interpreted, about repentance and forgiveness.

Instead, the meaning is simpler and more profound. Find what is lost. Find whomever is lost, even if they’re in your house. Do whatever you have to do. And when it’s found, when they’re found, celebrate. As Dr. Levine puts it:

Don’t wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don’t wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don’t stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past. Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate, and invite others to join you . . . Take advantage of resurrection—it is unlikely to happen twice.⁵

Find what is lost. Celebrate when you do. May it be so with us and our relationships. May it be so among and between nations. May it be so for and with all. Amen.

³ Levine, 62.

⁴ Levine, 68.

⁵ Levine, 69.