

St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana
Lent 4 C "Table Grace"
Marie F. Fleming
TEXT Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
Josh 5:9-12 2 Corinth 5: 16-21 Psalm 32

Nature hates a vacuum, doesn't it? Anyone familiar with Family Systems theory (or who simply grew up in a family...) is not surprised with the way this story plays out. If one child is reliable and responsible, the other is free to "test the boundaries", shall we say.

"There was a man who had two sons" Even if we don't already know where this is headed, we know enough to look for conflict on the horizon.

And because it comes from Jesus, we know there are lessons to be learned.

Familiarly called, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son", my New Revised Standard Version labels it "The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother". Eugene Peterson's "Message" calls it, more ambiguously, "The Story of the Lost Son."

"There was a man who had two sons" – as familiar and evocative as this opening is, the story's true introduction in verses 1-3 sets the stage: Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus...

There is a recurring theme in the gospel of Luke: To listen or hear is to act! "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and act upon it." (Luke 6) Look it up, you'll find some 15 examples. For Luke, true hearing involves a response.

So, here we have a gathering of outcasts who have come to listen, to hear, to act.

AND we have Pharisees and scribes – members of the "in crowd" - clearly NOT listening. No, just the opposite, they are grumbling and talking among themselves, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

This chapter, Luke 15, includes two parables in addition to today's reading. There are also the Parable of the Lost sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. All three focus on restoring what is lost.

And, based upon the introduction, they seem to be calling out the grumblers.

During the season of Lent, these parables invite us to consider both the grace of God that has sought and welcomed us and the constant danger that religious people face: thinking that we are better.

Justo Gonzales Christian Century <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-31-lent-4c-luke-151-3-11b-32>

Keeping all this in mind, may we turn for a moment to the father?

Who is he, anyway? We Christians might be inclined to identify him with a distinctly Christian God, as if the God of Israel were devoid of mercy and grace. As if “our” God were a new and improved model.

Participants in our “Living the Questions” and “Saving Jesus” conversations will be familiar with Amy-Jill Levine, a scholar of Christian Scriptures who interprets Jesus from a Jewish perspective. According to Dr. Levine, the loving and merciful human father is not an anomaly among Jewish fathers.

In a recent interview with the Christian Century, Levine explained, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-08/parable-and-its-baggage> “There is no compelling reason in the parable itself to see the father as anyone other than a human father.”

In other words, the God of Israel is like a human father, not the other way around.

To illustrate, Levine turns to Rabbinic literature, that centuries-long collection of reflection and argument, commentary and interpretation, and imaginative extrapolation based on Hebrew scripture.

These are sacred texts with which Jesus and his audience – especially the Pharisees and scribes - would have been familiar. Let’s call it Jesus’ source material:

Pesikta Rabbati (184–85) recounts:

“A king had a son who had gone astray from his father on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, “Return to your father.” But the son sent word back to his father saying, How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you. I cannot’ Then his father sent word, ‘Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you.’ So God says, “Return to me, and I will return to you.”

“For the rabbis, the challenge is not in seeing God’s love in a new way; the challenge is to get the wayward to return.” There is no value judgment on lostness. What matters is restoring what who is lost.

Our parable is located within a whole 10-chapter chunk of Luke’s gospel, that leads up to Jerusalem and the cross, where Jesus is training disciples in these

essentials: hospitality, mercy, and grace, often using parables to paint pictures, and often in the context of a meal.

A modern-day example of a community formed around hospitality and grace is found in St. Lydia Lutheran Church, a small congregation of about 50 people in Brooklyn New York. Featured in the February issue of "Living Lutheran" magazine, the congregation was born about a decade ago when founding pastor, Emily Scott "noticed the people she was meeting in the city were longing for connection. Hospitality, in the act of having friends over for dinner, is rare in the city, she found. Apartments are tiny so people generally go out to restaurants to socialize. Scott's idea was both novel and ancient, rooted in the early Christian church: She founded a storefront congregation whose worship and communion are structured around an actual meal, prepared and cleaned up by the congregation. This dinner church features a meal which nourishes people physically and spiritually, in a setting where everyone is welcome and has a place at the table. Living Lutheran February, 2019 pp. 30-32

In today's reading from the Book of Joshua, the Israelites observe the end of their 2-generation wilderness sojourn by eating the fruit of the land. The manna having served its nutritive purpose is replaced by the more conventional kind of homecoming feast.

Likewise, a younger son's sojourn ends with a welcome home feast. And another son's leaving begins. Our Family Systems thinking readily explains: Now that the younger child is the "good one", the older is sprung free to go a little wild, to lose his cool, to disrespect and disagree and disappear.

By the time Jesus gets to the end of this third and last parable, I hope the scribes and Pharisees are listening,

Because, just when I am certain God likes the younger child best - the one who sees the error of his ways, who returns and is restored to family membership with all the accoutrements of that position: the Ring, the Robe, the Shoes, even the feast - there is this surprising scene of grace played out between the father and his older child.

My self-righteous, older-child heart leaps within me at this magnificent realization: The same loving father runs to welcome the returning prodigal now goes out to find this newly-missing one, bearing a the child's heated tirade and THEN beseeching him, begging him to return, that the family might be restored.

The aforementioned Dr. Levine has teamed up with retired Indianapolis Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso's to write a children's book on the three parables of Luke 15. It is called "Everyone Counts".

"The main message is about counting, searching for what is missing, and celebrating becoming whole again. It is an expansive vision in which everybody counts. From sheep to coins to human beings, the message is that it's worth searching for those who are lost. ...So, when the prodigal son's father realizes that he has "discounted" his older son, he says "I love you" and asks him to join the party. "Without you," he admits, "something is missing. With you, our family is complete."

I hope that the tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes and we who travel between the identities of found and never-lost, hear the grace in this interchange.

"I love you. Without you, something is missing. With you, our family is complete."

We may wonder how society would be different if we Jesus-followers consistently said those same words to our brothers and sisters of every nationality, race, income bracket, and faith tradition. What if we were to live and work and vote and preach with the conviction that everybody counts?"

<https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/cover-cover/everybody-counts-even-lollards>
Elizabeth Palmer, reviewer @ElizaBooksAnn

May God grant us grace to live our lives as if no table is fully set until everyone has taken their place.

Amen