

Sermon.

Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow forced his fond father to fork over the family finances. He flew far to foreign fields and frittered his fortune feasting fabulously with faithless friends. Finally facing famine and fleeced by his fellows in folly, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy farmyard. Fairly famished he fain would have filled his frame with the foraged foods of the fodder fragments left by the filthy farmyard creatures.

'Foey', he said, 'My father's flunkies fare far fancier,' the frazzled fugitive found feverishly, frankly facing facts. Frustrated by failure and filled with foreboding he forthwith fled to his family. Falling at his father's feet, he floundered forlornly. 'Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor.'

But the faithful father, forestalling further flinching frantically flagged the flunkies. 'Fetch forth the finest fatling and fix a feast.' But the fugitive's fault-finding frater frowned on the fickle forgiveness of the former folderol. His fury flashed.

But fussing was futile, for the far-sighted father figured, such filial fidelity is fine, but what forbids fervent festivity? The fugitive is found! "Unfurl the flags, with fanfares flaring! Let fun and frolic freely flow!" "Former failure is forgotten, folly is

forsaken! And forgiveness forms the foundation for future fortitude."¹

Sometimes the familiar stories are the hardest ones to hear again. We know them so well that we miss important details because we gravitate toward what we remember.

Sometimes it's helpful to look at familiar stories through a different lens, to try to hear them anew.

We won't exegete the Prodigal Son in F, but let's look at the context of this parable first.

This chapter of Luke begins with Jesus teaching, and the author tells us that tax collectors and "sinners" gathered around him. At the sight of this, the religious elite begin exaggerating the situation, Jesus welcomes and eats with sinners.

So, Jesus breaks into a story.

The first story, though, isn't the story of the Prodigal Son. It's our next lens through which we can look at the story of the Prodigal Son.

His story is what we heard Carol read earlier. A shepherd has 100 sheep yet realizes one of his sheep is missing. Jesus asks the religious elite presumably, which

¹ Author unknown. "The Prodigal Son in F,"
Printed version found at

<http://www.dgchurch.org/jokes/n-p/prodigal-son-parable-in-f.htm>

of you wouldn't leave the other 99 to find the lost sheep?

Now, we might see this in our own framework. One of our pets runs away, and we put up flyers and post in our online neighborhood forums. We leave the rest of our pets in the house while we spread out a search party.

While shepherds would've come to care for their sheep much like pets, it was also a small business. So that a shepherd searching for a lost sheep is compassionate, but also unwise. How many of you who own businesses or have worked closely in one, would risk 99% of the company to recoup the 1% loss you experienced?

And then when you do, would you celebrate with a party akin to a family who had found a lost pet?

Jesus is teaching everyone that God's priorities are not the same as ours; God's values are calibrated differently.

There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes heart and life, he says, than over 99 righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

From here he goes right into the next story, still not the story of the Prodigal Son, but instead another lens for us to hear it. Hold on to these.

He says there's a woman who has ten silver coins, and she loses one. So she turns the house upside down looking for it. She flips on all the lights, sweeps the floors, checks the vacuum bag, pulls out the couch cushions, probably even looks in the heating vents. Who knows where she found it, but we know she did, because she calls all her friends, or let's be real, she texts them, posts it to Facebook and uploads a close up of the coin to Instagram. She's ecstatic at finding the one coin she lost.

In the same way, Jesus says, joy breaks out in heaven over one sinner who changes their heart and life.

From there he goes into the story of the Prodigal Son.

A man with two sons. The younger son essentially tells his father he's dead to him, demands his share of the estate, sells his property, and squanders in on wild living.

At some point he runs out of money, and has to take the most unclean job a Jewish person could have had—literally and ritually. He works as hired hand feeding pigs. At some point, when he was forced to eat their food just to survive, Jesus says he came to himself. He conjures up a plan to grovel before his father and beg for a role as a servant because even his father's servants were better off than this.

As he begins his sojourn home, we discover the father was waiting for him, looking for him, and while he was still a long way off, the father, hiked up his cloak and began to run to his child to welcome him back into the family.

Whether the son is truly contrite or not, we don't get a chance to find out because the Father throws a party for him.

Meanwhile the older son, the pious one perhaps, the one who never left the fold, he is left seething in resentment. What is this inequity? He exaggerates the wild living of his brother (or does he?), and he complains that he didn't get an 'atta boy, let alone a party for doing the right thing—not ever.

The father pleads with the son to join the party. "Look, you have always been with me. Everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead but now he's alive. He was lost but now he's found."

Oh, this is so good and rich. We could look at it for weeks. As we look at these parables with new eyes, where are you located within them?

Think of that first parable, the lost sheep, wandering on its own, head down, clueless to anything or anyone else. This is the son, selfish and self-absorbed, wandering the wilderness of lust and self-aggrandizement. The shepherd searched, the father longed, and in the end, they were

reunited. A party ensued. Because heaven rejoices at such good news—such is the gospel that the lost are found.

Remember then that second parable, the lost coin, misplaced, unnoticed, and unspent. Yet the coin was never outside the confines of the woman's home. Like the older son who never squandered anything, felt unrecognized, and never left the safety of his father's home. He was always with him, like that coin that was hiding underneath your keys. Jesus says, this too is the good news worthy of a heavenly raucous—such is the gospel that even the lost who don't realize they're lost can be found. Makes you wonder if the older son in the parable, or those in the audience, ever came to themselves like the younger son did.

But isn't that the good news, too? That even when we don't realize our location, we are always found in God's grace?

Did the younger son really change his ways? Was he actually remorseful? Scholars disagree. No matter, Jesus is saying; lost or found, it's all within God's grace.

Did the older son come to himself? Did he see his brother as a part of the family, and find himself within it too? Or did entitlement and resentment lead his way? No matter, Jesus is saying; lost or found, seething resentment or sacrificial reconciliation, all of it is within the depths of God's grace.

Lost in Grace

Luke 15

Brent Newberry

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

This is the good news:
Wherever you find yourself today,
in youth or old age,
in retirement or the job hunt,
underneath mountains of student loan
debt or clipping coupons,
in your loneliness or popularity,
whether you're being bullied or judged by
others,
battling medical challenges or caring for
someone who is,
in your shame, in your guilt, in your
addictions, in your violence, in your fear, in
your perfectionism, in your wealth, in your
health,
dead or alive,
sheep or coin,
wandering or at home,
no matter, Jesus is saying,
you are lost and found within the height
and depth and breadth and width of God's
grace.

You do not sojourn alone.

God is with you and within you.

So what's forbidding your fervent festivity?

Amen.