

In the 15th chapter of Luke Jesus tells three stories. The first story Jesus told was in response to the Pharisees and other teachers of the law who made the comment, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They had seen Jesus keeping company with tax collectors and other “sinners” and were being critical of Jesus. Jesus then told them this parable:

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

After Jesus told them that story he went straight into this story:

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins, and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels and God over one sinner who repents.”

Then, before we have time to catch our breath, Jesus launches into the story we just read about the father who had two sons. In most Bibles there are headings for the different sections of scripture. For instance, in the 15th chapter of Luke there are three headings. They are titles to the stories. In the NIV translation of the Bible, the heading title to the first story is “**The Parable of the Lost Sheep**”. The title to the second story is “**The Parable of the Lost Coin**”. The title to our story for today is “**The Parable of the Lost Son**” or “**The Prodigal Son**”. I have a question. Why were all three titles centered around what was lost? Why couldn’t the title to the sheep story have been, “The Parable of the Joyful Shepherd”? Why couldn’t the title to the coin story have been, “The Parable of the Determined Woman”? And why couldn’t the title to the story about the man with two sons have been just that “The Parable of the Man Who Had Two Sons”?

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I'm betting most of you know this parable as the parable of the Prodigal Son and not as the parable of the Man Who Had Two Sons. Just for today I want you to pretend you have never heard this story. I want you to pretend that you are hearing it for the first time and that the story has no title. It will be hard to do, especially for those of you who have heard this story a thousand times and could recite it in your sleep. But sometimes parables, even the ones we think we have "learned", have a way of surprising us. I don't what will be harder, you listening to the story as if you are hearing it for the first time, or me trying to tell it without making a thousand points! Let's try it and see what happens.

There was a man who had two sons. We are not told anything at all about the two sons at this point, other than that one is older than the other. We are not told if the two boys get along or whether or not the father plays favorites. All we know is that there are two sons and the youngest of the two went to his father and said, "Father, give me my share of the estate." In those days the youngest son was entitled to 1/3 of the estate. So it literally paid to be born first! Surprisingly, the father did just as his younger son demanded. Notice I said, "Demanded." The younger son didn't ask his father for his portion of the estate, he demanded it as if he was entitled to it.

Not long after receiving his money, the younger son went off to a distant country and squandered his wealth in wild living. Now "wild living" can mean a lot of different things. I have always associated this "wild living" of the younger son as a "good time", but I'm not so sure it was a good time. Sometimes "wild living" is anything but a good time. Sometimes "wild living" is a lonely, empty life that is not all it's cracked up to be. Whatever the case, the younger son is in a fix. He is broke and now there is a famine in the country. Things got so bad that he resorted to hiring out to feed pigs. Before long he was right there with the pigs eating the pods because as the story goes "no one gave him anything." Talk about rock bottom. I don't know what is more sad, eating pods with pigs or knowing that you live in a world where it is possible that people could care less if you starve or not.

Finally, the younger son comes to his senses. He says to himself, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'" This

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younger son was no dummy. He knew how to play the game. He was a manipulator deluxe and was already conniving a way to get back in good with his father. He wasn't sorry for what he had done. He was sorry he was busted!

The younger son got up and went to his father. I can just see him practicing his pathetic little speech as he made his way back home. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Before the son could realize what was happening he launched into his pre-determined speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." He couldn't even get out the last few words of his speech, when his father cut him off by saying to his servants: "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

While all of this unconditional love and grace is going on, the older brother is in the field. When he came near the house he heard all the music and dancing and couldn't help but wonder what was going on. He called one of the servants and soon found out what was going on. Needless to say, he was not amused. In fact, he was so upset that he threw a pity party outside and refused to go in the house. So his father went out and pleaded with him. There goes that father again. Always reaching out to his boys. Always loving the unlovable. Always doing what Dr. Phil would never suggest.

The older brother went off on a tirade: "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" This older brother sure had a good imagination. How did he know the younger brother squandered the money on prostitutes? He hadn't talked to him and earlier in the story we are told he squandered it on "wild living". Maybe he spent it on prostitutes, but maybe he didn't. Perhaps the older brother is embellishing to make his case.

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Then here comes the father again. I just can't get over this father. Every time someone deserves to be slapped upside the head he surprises us. "My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

I don't know what is more remarkable, the father loving the son who went away or loving the son who stayed home. Either way, both received more than they deserved. It's a great thing to be surprised by God's grace.

James Howell told about a time when Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, came to Charlotte to speak:

Millard Fuller was a wealthy businessman who heard God's call and started Habitat for Humanity. We decided that instead of having a professional, preacher type introduce him, we could get a resident from a Habitat house. We asked Melissa Cornet -- tall, gangly, not an accomplished speaker. She was nervous. She poked around for words, but then suddenly began to speak to Fuller, who was sitting in the front row.

"Millard Fuller, you are the answer to my prayer. I grew up in a tenement, a terrible place full of drugs and violence. I wasn't nobody, knew I'd never be nobody. I grew up and had a little boy -- and there he was, in a terrible place, full of drugs and violence. I knew he wouldn't never be nobody either. So I got on my knees and I prayed, I prayed hard, I said, 'Lord, I will do anything, I will give up my life. But please, please, I just want my boy to have a chance to be somebody.' Millard Fuller, when God told you to give away your money, you were the answer to my prayer. I heard about Habitat, and I got to build a house. I met President Jimmy Carter and Millard Fuller. We got a house, a nice house. Millard Fuller, you are the answer to my prayer."

"Before we moved in, my boy had started school, but his teacher said he was slow, he would probably never catch up. He never smiled. But then we moved into our new house. He had his own room. And he began to shine that day. He got to where he played and had fun. And he started making good grades in school. Now he's in the third grade, and he's making straight A's. The other day my boy said,

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'Mama, do you know what I want to be when I grow up?' I said, 'No, what do you want to be?' He said, 'I'm going to be a doctor.' Millard Fuller, you're the answer to my prayer."

About this time Melissa figured she had talked too long, so, a little bit embarrassed, she said, "Well, without any further ado, here's Millard Fuller." Now, if you've ever been part of a standing ovation, you know how it goes: one person rises, then another, finally everyone else. But once in a while, an entire body of people leap to their feet. That's what they did for this wonderful woman's speech. Now she walked off to the side, and turned to clap for Millard Fuller. I put my arm around her, pointed to the crowd, and said, "Look Melissa. They're not clapping for him. They're clapping for you!"

You see that table over there? It's called a communion table. There is bread and juice on that table that represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ. And to think, it's all for lost sons, jealous siblings, fathers who love us more than they should, and most of all -- you! I can hear them now -- the saints in heaven are clapping for you. Welcome home!