

Testify to Love - Your Story Matters

“God’s Story”

[Luke 15:11-24](#)

This is the last sermon in our three week-sermon series called “[Testify to Love - Your Story Matters.](#)” Having explored our individual and collective stories the past two weeks, we now come to “God’s Story.”

The Bible is one long, continuous story from the story of creation and the beginning of the world in the book of Genesis to the story of new creation and the end of time in the book of Revelation. Within these two bookends, we find 66 books which tell stories that often overlap but other times contradict each other. Despite this existing tension, they all have something to tell us about God and God’s people.

As you know, Jesus’ preferred way of addressing the audience during his public ministry was through storytelling, using a figure of speech called parables. The gospel according to Mark puts it this way about Jesus in chapter 4, verses 33 and 34, “With many such parables, he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”

A parable is an illustration, a story that is designed to teach a lesson. Most parables appear quite simple on the surface; however, if we slow down and take the time to soak in the words, we recognize a much greater depth than we could have imagined. Out of the 40 plus simple yet memorable parables of Jesus recorded in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, I’ve picked the Parable of the Prodigal Son to tell you “God’s Story.”

This parable is the last of three parables that Jesus told the Pharisees and the scribes when they grumbled about how tax collectors and sinners were amongst the crowd of his followers. They said, accusingly, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!”

Of the various factions that existed in Jewish society during the time of Jesus’ ministry, the Pharisees were considered to be the most vocal and influential group, as they had the strong support of the common people. They were held in high esteem for their strict obedience to the Law, with its emphasis on observing purity. The Pharisees often criticized Jesus and his disciples for their seemingly lack of devotion to upholding their interpretation of the Law. In the gospels, we often find Jesus rebuking them for their legalism and their “holier-than-thou attitude.”

In response to the charge that he was associating with the “unclean” people of their society, Jesus engages the Pharisees and the scribes, not with direct arguments, but rather with three stories told in succession. First, he tells them the parable of the lost sheep: A shepherd who has 100 sheep in his care discovers that one of them is missing. So, he goes out to find the lost member of the flock, leaving the 99 behind. When he finds the lost sheep, he rejoices and celebrates with his friends and neighbors.

Second, he tells them the parable of the lost coin: A woman who has 10 silver coins loses one of them. She searches everywhere to find the lost coin. When she finds it, she rejoices and celebrates with her friends and neighbors.

Third, he tells the parable of the lost son, which we read as today's scripture reading: A father has two sons. The second son goes away to a foreign country with his inheritance and squanders it wastefully. One day, he comes to his senses and decides to go back home. When he returns, his father welcomes him back and throws a party for him.

As you may have noticed, the three stories share the same theme of being lost and found, as well as feasting and rejoicing. But, if we take a moment to slow down, we can recognize that the third story, the parable of the prodigal son is of much greater depth and complexity than the first two stories. Despite involving only two sons, rather than 100 sheep or 10 coins, we soon realize that sheep and coins are much easier to deal with than us, children of God.

Let's dive into the text. We see that the younger of the two sons has asked his father to give him his inheritance. It would have been foolish then, as it is now, for a father to transfer his property to his children in his lifetime. Particularly for a society that emphasized honor and shame, the fact that the younger son demanded his inheritance before his father was failing in his health and that the father granted this absurd request would have brought great shame and dishonor upon the family. But, for some reason, this father goes along with the younger son's request. The father divides his livelihood and gives the younger son his share.

We know where this story is going even before Jesus goes any further, don't we? Leaving behind the treasured values of his family and community, the younger son ends up squandering everything. Making things worse for him, the distant country where he went to sow his wild oats was hit by a severe famine. Things get so bad that he must become a hired hand, working on a pig farm in conditions so bad that even the livestock are eating better than he is! The pride and ambition with which he daringly asked his father for his share of the inheritance is long gone. He is left defeated and humiliated, alone and lost in a foreign land.

In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen talks about the inner consequences the younger son must have suffered from leaving home, in addition to his material and physical losses. He says (p.46f):

The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world.

It goes somewhat like this: I am not sure anymore that I have a safe home, and I observe other people who seem to be better off than I. I wonder how I can get to where they are. I try hard to please, to achieve success, to be recognized. When I fail, I feel jealous or resentful of these others. When I succeed, I worry that others will be jealous or resentful of me. I become suspicious or defensive and increasingly afraid that I won't get what I so much desire or will lose what I already have. Caught in this tangle of needs and wants, I no longer know my own motivations.

I feel victimized by my surroundings and distrustful of what others are doing or saying. Always on my guard, I lose my inner freedom and start dividing the world into those who are for me and those who are against me. I wonder if anyone really cares. I start looking for validations of my distrust. And wherever I go, I see them, and I say, "No one can be trusted," And, then I wonder whether anyone ever really loved me. The world around me becomes dark. My heart grows heavy. My body is filled with sorrows. My life loses meaning. I have become a lost soul.

When the younger son realizes that he is completely lost, he remembers his true identity and decides to go back home. Yet, his return journey is full of ambiguities. It's filled with guilt about the past, doubts about his father's forgiveness, and worries about the future. So, he prepares a calculated confession and rehearses it on the way home: *"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."*

Calling this confession "a self-serving repentance that offers the possibility of survival" and not "the immense love of a forgiving God," Nouwen continues by stating that "Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring, and renewing. As long as I want to do even a part of that myself, I end up with partial solutions, such as becoming a hired servant." (p. 53)

Going back to the parable, Jesus states that even while the younger son was still far off in the distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. Any noble man in the first century would not be caught running in public, but we see this father moved to run toward his son, whom he greets with the warmest of embraces. He has no time to concern himself with the good opinion of others. The son begins to give the statement of confession that he had prepared; but, before he can ask his father to treat him like one of his hired hands, his father interrupts him and calls for a party to celebrate his return.

Literally, there was nothing that the younger son had to do in order to be allowed to come home after all of his wandering. There was no heart-to-heart talk, no confession, no punishment, no discipline. Absolutely, nothing was required of him to be forgiven and to be loved by his father! What do you think? It doesn't sound right to our discerning ears, does it?

Actually, that was what the Pharisees were thinking, too when they saw Jesus welcoming tax collectors and other sinners. They were concerned that Jesus might be condoning their sin by associating with them. And what was Jesus' response to them? In Barbara Brown Taylor's words, "God is too busy rejoicing over found sheep, found coins, and found children to worry about what they did while they were lost!" (*The Preaching Life*, p.162f) Indeed, God's ways are different from our ways. The way of the LORD is unconditional love.

Jesus' stories of the lost and found are our own stories, too. Finding the lost, whether they are sheep, coins, or people, takes work. It also requires our best efforts at self-forgetfulness. About this work of finding the lost, Amy-Jill Levine says in her book, *Short Stories by Jesus*,

"Do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate with others, both so that you can share the joy and so that the others will help prevent the recovered from ever being lost again. Don't wait till you receive apology; You may never get one. Don't wait till 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, invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come later, so much the better. And if not, you still have done what is necessary. You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. You will have opened a second chance for wholeness." (p.69)

In this way, while you continue your effort to find the lost in your lives and celebrate the joy of recovery and return, I hope that you will embody the self-forgetful nature of God we find in Jesus' parables. In them, we find the story of God, who relentlessly pursues all of God's children without condemnation or blame.

Like the father of the Prodigal Son, may we testify to the gracious love of God at work in our lives by welcoming the lost with open arms and a running embrace. May God give us the strength and courage to continue our efforts until that day when all of God's children have found their way home. Amen!