

WPC/Korean Glory Joint Worship Service  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
March 21, 2010 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

The Prodigal Father  
Luke 15

Luke 15 contains 3 parables about things that are lost and then found. Actually, these stories are one connected parable told in three parts. Luke tells us in verse 3 that Jesus “told them this parable,” not three different parables.

The context for the chapter and its teachings is that Jesus is attracting outcasts – tax collectors and sinners. And not only is he welcoming these outcasts, he *eats* with them, which in the Middle East is the sign and seal of full acceptance and restoration into the community. No wonder the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling. Jesus starts with the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and then he moves to his most famous story, the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The problem with a parable as well known and beloved as this one is that it can become limp from too much handling. We’ve heard it so many times that the shock value has worn off. We already know the ending – the boy is always welcomed back home. So it’s helpful to try to see this story through Middle Eastern eyes.

Jesus says that this story is about a man and his two sons. You might be wondering where the mother is, but the thing about parables is they're often incomplete in their details. Jesus simply says this is a story about a father who loved his two children and wanted them to love each other too.

The request of the younger son for his father to give him his share of his inheritance was shocking because it meant that the son was impatient for his father to die, since that would be the time when he would normally receive his inheritance. But the father loves his son so much that he gives him what he asks for.

The son then goes to a far country and engages in dissolute living. It's the reason we call this son the prodigal – prodigal means to be wildly/recklessly extravagant and lavish, usually spending money on yourself.

A famine hits, he runs out of money, and then he hits rock bottom for a Jew – he gets a job feeding pigs!

He then realizes that even the hired hands in his father's house have more than enough to eat. A hired hand, literally a day laborer, is even lower on the labor scale than a servant or slave. A servant at least has the security of always being fed. Hired day laborers can be paid at the end of the day but

not necessarily rehired for the next day. But the son remembers that even the hired day laborers are secure and fed in his father's house.

So he decides to return home. Notice that while he was still far off, his father **saw** him and was filled with compassion. Since he was far off, that meant that his father had been actively watching and waiting for him to come back. He had not forgotten his son. He still loved him.

He throws a celebration for his younger son, but when the older son appears, he refuses to enter the party, which shows the older son also rebels against his father. It's a Middle Eastern custom that at banquets the eldest son is expected to serve the guests as a head waiter in order to honor the guests. But the older son refuses to even join the feast for his brother, thus intentionally and publicly insulting his father.

I'd like to make two reflections on this text. First, let's look at the connection between the three parts of this parable. Notice that when the sheep gets lost, the shepherd goes into the wilderness to search for it until he finds it. When the coin gets lost, the woman lights a lamp and searches her house until she finds it. But when the son gets lost, the father stays home and waits. Why? Isn't the boy as lost as the sheep? Isn't the boy as valuable as the coin? Why doesn't the father go after the boy? Perhaps the father

responds differently because he knows that there's a big difference between sheep and coins and people.

Jesus makes it clear that this father is wealthy. He could have easily sent some of his hired hands into the distant country to find his son and force him to come back home. And, knowing human nature, we all have a pretty good idea of what would have happened if the son was dragged back to his father's house.

I like the way Jay Kessler puts it: the father would have looked at him and said, "You've disgraced our family name. Look at you, a nice Jewish boy feeding pigs! You've wasted all that money I gave you. Now you go up to your room and think about what you've done, and don't show your face until you're truly sorry." So the boy goes to his room simmering and thinks, "Now that's just like my old man. Just when I was going to make it big in pork, he interferes with my life! I'm going to live my life the way I want to live it!" You see, the boy would be back in his father's house, but the problem would remain.

So what is the difference between sheep and coins and people? Love. The shepherd certainly cares for his sheep, and the woman obviously values her coins, but the sheep and the coins are not in the same kind of relationship with their owners as are the father and son. Human relationships need to be

based on love, which is both reciprocal and voluntary. You can't force anyone to love you, no matter how much power you have. The father wisely understands this fact, and so he does not treat his son like he would treat a lost sheep or a lost coin.

The second reflection I'd like to make concerns a criticism made by Muslims about this parable: "The story of the prodigal son proves that the cross is unnecessary to forgiveness. The boy comes home. His father welcomes him. There is no cross and no incarnation." Is this true?

Let's look once again at the text. After the prodigal hits rock bottom feeding pigs, he decides to return to his father. Imagine what he must have been thinking during his long walk home. His family, his father's servants, and everyone in his village would ridicule him for his foolish ways. He would probably be punished for his disobedience and humiliated for life. But he had no choice.

While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. Ken Bailey notes that he is also well aware of the type of treatment that his son will be subjected to once he enters the village. So the father makes a decision.

He runs to meet his son. The Greek word used for 'run' here comes from the root word meaning foot-racing in a stadium. In other words, the

father literally races to meet his son. Now in order not to trip as he races down the road, the father has to lift up his robe. That meant that his undergarments would show – he runs like a girl, like a mother instead of a father. It would have been very undignified and shameful for a wealthy man like him to race through town like that. So the attention of the villagers is shifted from the son to the father, who takes upon himself the shame and humiliation that is due the son.

The father is well aware of how hard it will be to endure the teasing and ridicule of the villagers in place of his son. And it is here that we find the cross of Christ. At great cost to himself, God Almighty came down into our world and became human. Christ took it upon himself to bear suffering and shame in our place on the cross. His suffering on the cross was not just physical pain, but also the agony of rejected love and a broken relationship.

The reunion between father and son in this parable is quite memorable. The son had decided on the way home that he would not only apologize to his father ("Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son"), but he would also grovel at his feet ("Treat me like one of your hired hands").

But when they meet, the son is only able to get out the first part of his apology, because the father is not interested in hearing his son grovel. He is

so excited to have his son back that he shouts to his servants, "Quickly, put the best robe on my son. And put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet... And kill old Spotty the calf!" A huge celebration ensues.

Furthermore, notice what happens later that day at the celebration. When the older son publicly insults his father by refusing to join the feast, the father willingly endures the shame a second time and goes out to reconcile himself with his son. The sign of the cross is again present.

Tom Long tells a story about a father who loved to dance with his young daughter. Whenever there was music, whether it was at a party or a wedding or a family gathering, he would go over to his daughter and say, "I believe this is our dance." She would jump into his arms and they would trot out onto the dance floor together.

When she reached her teen years, she found herself going through a particularly difficult time in her life which put stress on all her relationships, especially with her parents. At a wedding reception, she was sitting alone when her father came up to her and said, "I believe this is our dance." She looked at him and responded, "No, it isn't."

Stunned and disappointed, the father slowly walked away. From that time forward, he never asked his daughter to dance again.

Time passed, and the daughter grew older, went to college, got a job, got married, had children of her own. She began to miss the special bond she used to have with her father. Finally, at a family gathering, she heard the music starting to play, and she decided to act. She walked up to her father and said, "I believe this is our dance."

Her father looked at her with eyes full of love and said, "I've been waiting for you."

God loves us so much that he endured pain and humiliation on the cross in our place. God willingly races down the road to meet us. God is throwing the biggest party of all time, just for us. Whether we've been the younger prodigals or the elder siblings, God is waiting for us to join in the celebration.

The good news is that when we realize our sinfulness and turn towards God in repentance, we have a Father who has been waiting for us, who runs to meet us. As Haddon Robinson says, God's arms are open wide, and he's not angry with us. More than anything else, he just wants us to come home. He says, "I don't care if you're covered with mud and manure. I don't care how you smell. Welcome home! Welcome home!" Thanks be to God who welcomes us home. Amen.