

Lent 4, Year C (RCL)
March 27, 2022
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

God Loves a Party

What we call this parable that we find in Luke's Gospel says a lot about how we interpret it. The title by which most of us know this story, The Parable of the Prodigal Son, puts the emphasis on the son who leaves what is familiar to go out and grab life by the horns and take in all that the world has to offer. But we could also call it The Parable of the Lost Son. That would make a lot of sense since it follows and is grouped with two other parables called The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin. Though if we do call it The Lost Son the question becomes, which of the sons is lost? Is it the one who separates himself from his father and brother and from the life that he has known to go out and sow wild oats in barren fields? Or is it the older brother who is the lost son, lost to the father because the father focuses so much on the son who is not there that he neglects the one who is. As one commentator says, "The father indulges the one who slights him and slights the one who indulges him."ⁱ But it is the older brother, not the younger, that the father goes looking for.

We might also call it The Father Who Lost His Son or maybe that should be The Father Who Lost His *Sons*, with the emphasis on the loving and perhaps over-indulgent father whose family could provide a

textbook illustration of a dysfunctional family. Or should we dub it The Parable of the Waiting Father? Many have done so.

Shannon Kirshner, a Presbyterian minister in Chicago, suggests we call it “The Parable of the Missing Mother,” though I don’t entirely follow her logic. I have another suggestion for a title to this parable, but we’ll get back to that in a bit.

In telling this story, I suspect that Jesus may have expected that we’d see familiar faces in one or more of the characters of this parable and that that is part of what Jesus had in mind in telling it.

Who among us has not seen an entitled young person manipulate both parents and power structures to give them whatever they want? Who among us has not seen a parent overextending themselves financially and emotionally, trying to do what they believe is best for their child, or in the hopes of winning their child’s love? Who among us does not know someone who is a master of keeping a careful ledger of every old grievance, every grudge, every past wrong, every slight, every unsettled score? We all know these people. Maybe we even *are* these people.

But more important than creating familiar, relatable characters, I think what Jesus is doing in this parable is painting us a word picture of the kind of reality God wishes for us – of a party to which everyone is invited to share a communal joy – to celebrate wholeness – to rejoice in reconciliation. Getting back to titles, I’d like to suggest “God Loves a Party!” for this one. God’s party is for everyone out there who has lost

their way; for everyone who has hit rock bottom and has come to themselves with the realization that things have to change and they have to change now; for everyone who has known the searing pain of having a child turn away from them; for everyone who has made mistakes in life and wish they could have a do-over; for everyone who waits, hoping against hope for the return of someone they love; for everyone who feels unseen, canceled, alienated, or neglected – God invites us all to come to the party – to put past hurts behind us and to experience the joy of homecoming – of reconciliation. We might even call it resurrection, for as the father tells his older son, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life” – clearly, the language of resurrection.

What the father in the story wants most is for all that is broken to be made whole again. And many things are broken in this story – the father’s heart, the prodigal himself who left full of bravado and self-importance and returned home in shame, the father’s relationship with both of his sons, the brother’s relationships with one another, propriety, trust, respect – all of that has been broken.

Of the younger son, Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School, says, “I neither like nor trust the younger son. I do not see him doing anything other than what he has always done – take advantage of his father’s love. ... And yet his father loves him, and he is a member of the family.”ⁱⁱ

And so despite the son's rejection, despite his selfishness and irresponsibility, and despite having squandered half of his old man's wealth, when the younger son returns, the father is over the moon with joy. He rushes to put a ring on his finger and gives him new clothes to replace his rags. He kills the fatted calf, and sends out messengers to invite everyone to an over-the-top party so that he can share his joy with his entire community.

But the family is not yet whole, and it takes some time for the father to realize that. He looks around at all the people gathered for the party and notices that his older son is missing. Of course he's missing – he's out in the fields, working faithfully and hard, doing what he has been doing all along. He doesn't even know about the party. It seems that, though all the neighbors have been invited, no one has thought to invite him in from the fields until the father finally notices his absence. Is it any wonder that he is less than thrilled to hear that there is a lavish party being held in honor of his younger brother?

A story that is supposed to end with a jubilant celebration, ends instead with a father and his son out in a field. They can see the house in the distance, bursting at the seams with friends and neighbors, they can hear the music and the laughter, but they can't be part of it.

The father tries. “Son,” he says, “you are always with me and what I have is yours.” The Greek word teknon, here translated as son, is better translated “child” – a term of endearment, not simply of relationship. The father reaches out in love, but the elder brother is deeply hurt and he can’t accept it, at least not right now. On that unhappy note the parable ends. There is still work to be done before they can join the party.

God loves a party and, like the father in the parable, wants all of us, all of everyone, to be there. We’re here. We get to experience the joy of celebrating and being part of God’s party. But we need to ask, “Who is not here?” And if we aren’t all here, then our family is not whole. Who do we know who is like the older son – on the outside looking in, not feeling valued, respected, or welcome? Who do we know who is like the younger son, who has been part of us in the past, but has left and isn’t sure how they’ll be received if they try to return? God loves a party, and the party has already begun. But it won’t be complete until everyone joins in.

Levine says that we can find a number of take-aways from this story. She offers these suggestions, “Recognize that the one you have lost may be right in your own household. 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 until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don’t wait until 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, and invite others to join you. ... You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. You will have opened a second chance for wholeness.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Finding the lost takes work and intentionality, especially finding lost people, who are infinitely more complicated than lost sheep or lost coins. But the reward of a chance at wholeness and joy are priceless. And the party will be quite grand.

ⁱ Bernard Brandon Scott, Re-Imagine the World

ⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, Short Stories by Jesus p. 74

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, Short Stories by Jesus p. 75