

Luke 15:1-32 Jesus shares stories about three lost things and three celebrations

Jesus is confronted by the Scribes and Pharisees for being with the wrong people. They do not approve of his table fellowship and the company he keeps. As a response to their grumbling, he tells three stories. We often treat the third story separately from the first two. The story often called “The Prodigal Son,” is much beloved. Millions of people over the centuries have resonated with the story of the son who returns home and is embraced by a loving father.

Many see themselves as the prodigal (or wasteful) son who longs to be welcomed by a loving father. While this moving picture of a God who embraces those who do not deserve forgiveness is meaningful, it does not tell the complete story.

Held together, these stories can be thought of as “The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.” A new translation, the Common English Bible (which is my personal favorite) calls this passage, “Three Occasions for Celebration.” This shifts the focus from the lost things to the reaction and joyful celebration that happens when they are found. This is particularly poignant considering the three tales end with an open-ended mystery. The Father and Elder Son are outside the party, with the Father begging the son to come in.

What if instead of focusing on the lost things or the celebration, we focus on the one who did the losing? We often identify God with the Shepherd, the Woman, and the Father. The traditional reading is this: God is the one who searches and seeks out the lost. God celebrates finding one and returning it to the flock. Parables though, defy simple understanding.

Jesus’ parables are like a fine cut gem. If you focus on what particular facet, you are missing the rest of its brilliance and beauty. So let me post another understanding.

What is the shepherd’s only job? To keep track of the sheep. Who’s fault is it that the coin was lost? Did the coin or the sheep need to repent? When we see that the shepherd and the woman had something to do with the losing of the sheep and the coin, then we may have more trouble placing God in that place of the story. We also may see the Father’s actions in losing—not the younger son—but the elder. Remember that party for the younger son? The elder son was in the field—why wasn’t he invited? Could it be that it was the elder son who was lost, not by his own actions, but by the negligence of the father.

Just like it was the shepherd who lost the sheep, the woman who lost the coin, it was the Father who lost the elder son.

So if not God, then who? Perhaps it is the Church. We who follow Christ lose track of those who should be a part of the flock, the savings, and the family. We lose ones—not because they need repentance—but because we have turned away.

Who is lost? This is the question we must keep asking as the Church. Who have lost track of? Is it the older person who can no longer get themselves to worship? Is it the same-sex couple who is no longer deemed worthy of leadership or inclusion? Is it the immigrant who has an ‘funny’ accent and does not know the customs of the Church? We must name our complicity in losing too many. We lose due to false judgment, lack of creativity, lack of ingenuity, and lack of energy.

One thing that unites these stories is the celebration. As the Church we should keep the celebrations going. We, like the Father, should be begging the lost to come and celebrate. Join the saints and the sinners at the Table of Christ and celebrate with Joy.