

“From Grumbings to Grace”

Third Sermon in the Lenten Series: Learning to Live in the Desert – WILDLIFE (Resources)

Luke 15:1-32

New Revised Standard Version

Luke groups a trilogy of Jesus’ parables together in chapter 15 as a response to the “grumbings” of the scribes and Pharisees.

Grumbling seems to be a socially acceptable way to express our frustration, anger, or annoyance because when we hear someone grumbling, we RARELY ask them to stop. We either ignore it or walk away, or try to change the subject, or maybe validate their feelings while offering another perspective – but many, many times we do what? We JOIN IN and start to grumble ourselves, don’t we? Grumbling thrives in groups.

I like to call my grumbling “venting.” Seems nicer to call it that. Like I’m just letting off steam that needs to get out. But that steam didn’t come out of nowhere; it had to build up. But perhaps this idea of something building up to a boiling point isn’t far off, because the Greek

word in verse two for grumbings is *diagongýzō* which means “to show smouldering discontent, to murmur, usually in a crowd or one to another, almost always as a form of indignant complaining; to drone on.”¹ In other words, grumbling is not a one-off complaint; grumbling comes from a deeply held belief or experience.

Now in Luke 15, the scribes and the Pharisees are grumbling because Jesus is giving the tax collectors and sinners time and attention, he’s welcoming them at his table, sharing stories and life with them. I’m sure the scribes and the Pharisees would have rather Jesus said to the sinners: “*See these righteous men over here, these scribes and Pharisees? Why can’t you be more like them? Once you do what they do, then you can join us for dinner.*” But Jesus doesn’t; he sits down with the sinners.

¹ Definition from Strong’s Concordance accessed on March 6, 2021 at

<https://www.studylight.org/lexicons/eng/greek/1234.html>.

The thing is, the scribes and the Pharisees were really good, sincere people. Some scholars actually believe that of all the Jews, the Pharisees were most like Jesus, both in how they understood and respected the law and in how they acted. These are religious professionals, who have devoted their lives to trying to do what God has asked them to do. It's not an act.

I'd venture to say that any of us who tune into worship regularly, who read and study the Bible, who pray, who volunteer and serve – we are very much like scribes and Pharisees. We truly, in our heart of hearts, want to do what is pleasing to God and most helpful to the world.

And it's because of our sincere faith, that we GRUMBLE when we see others who we perceive aren't trying as hard as us, or who are making choices that are more harmful than helpful. This is what's going on in Luke 15.

And so by Jesus sitting with tax collectors and sinners and breaking bread with them – he is making a bold statement. He's demonstrating that their actions do not define them. They are worthy of being in God's presence, of hearing the good news, and of sharing life with Jesus. Their actions, even their habitual actions, do not exclude them from the table of God, or from the very presence and attention of God.

Well now. This raises the age old question: If God just loves everybody and is gonna forgive everyone and just throw grace around like it's confetti, then what's the point of me trying to be good and do the right thing?! Shouldn't I just do whatever I want then? If I'm trying hard and these people aren't trying at all – and we all end up getting treated by God the same...then what's fair about that?

And therein lies the rub. Because if that's the question we're asking, we're never gonna to be satisfied with the answer. So maybe we need to ask a different question. In the

end, life is not about what is fair by our standards, or about how much we can “get away with” and still be “good with God;” it’s about a way of life that is good for us because it’s good for all. It’s about living the life that we see Jesus modeling for us in the gospels. Our question perhaps shouldn’t be “*why should I be good if others don’t have to be?*” but rather “*how can I create the most good in the world because God’s grace inspires me to?*” It’s not a comparison game or a competition; it’s an invitation.

You see, Jesus is not welcoming the tax collectors and sinners to the table because he’s choosing THEM “over and above” the Pharisees and the scribes. He’s saying, “*I choose you all; I claim you all; you are ALL welcome at the table.*”

We know from following Luke’s gospel thusfar, this is not the first time Jesus has paid more attention to those who are not traditionally at the center of attention. So this de-centering of the scribes and Pharisees experiences and desires had no

doubt been building up; I’m sure they felt less ‘seen’ by Jesus or like their good deeds didn’t matter, and I’m sure that bothered them because they worried that they’d lose the place they were used to having at the Table, a place of comfortable privilege and recognition and honor – of always being asked to give the opening prayer. Their grumbling makes sense from a human experience of realizing that your voice is no longer the one everyone is listening to, or even should be listening to necessarily. But grumbling doesn’t grow God’s kin-dom. Scooting over and making room, does. It’s not about you getting less attention from Jesus, it’s about more and more people getting to be near Jesus. The table is set for all of us, and is not complete until we’re all sitting down together.

Which is why we have these three parables about the lost being found, stories about repentance and grace.

And the first and second parable really turn our

traditional starting place for repentance on its head. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia* which means “to change one’s mind” – and so we usually think that repentance is about turning away from sin and turning toward God, and that is not untrue, but perhaps the changing of our minds begins with an even deeper perspective shift about our very relationship with God.

In these first two stories, we have a sheep that’s wandered off and a coin that’s lost. It would be an economic hit for the shepherd to lose a sheep and the coin the woman lost was probably worth a day’s wages. So both are worth looking for, but that’s just it – they had to be looked for, they had to be found. Lost coins don’t just work themselves out of seat cushions and roll across the floor to your feet. Lost sheep don’t just all the sudden get a GPS system implanted in them to guide them home.

They are not the moral heroes of their stories. It’s the shepherd and the woman who are relentless in their search for what is lost, and extravagant in their celebration when they find it. The “repentance” or “mind change/perspective shift” being, of course, that there is an absolute and unrelenting desire of God to find and form relationship with us. We do not have to prove anything to God to be worthy of being with God. God doesn’t need proof, God created us, that is proof enough that God loves us. This is the foundational basis of repentance: that God WANTS us, and because God wants us that gives us something to turn toward – not in fear, but in love.

At the core repentance means being CLAIMED. Being “found” by the one to whom you mean so much. “But wait a second, I thought repentance was self-examination and getting serious about all my shortcomings”² and confessing? Well, we don’t see the sheep or

² Cameron B.R. Howard, Rolf Jacobson, and Craig Koester, “NL Podcast 444: Lost Sheep, Coin, Son” *Working Preacher* (22 January 2021), accessed on 5

March 2021 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/nl-podcast-444-lost-sheep-coin-son-march-7-2021>.

the coin do ANY of those things do we? The sheep never says, *“I should never have wandered off from the flock and I promise never to do it again.”* There is no admission of guilt or accountability to do better. And the same with the coin.³

We learn two things from this: repentance is not just a YOU thing or a ME thing, it is a GOD thing. It does not begin with the question, *“What have you done wrong or what have I done wrong?”* it begins with the question, *“What does God do? Or what does God want?”* And clearly, God WANTS all of us to be “found,” that is, to be in the presence of God’s embrace of grace and to be acting in the likeness of Christ. God seeks us out like the Shepherd does the Sheep, like the woman does the coin.

And the claim God has on our lives is so joyous that it’s always worth celebrating – even when it doesn’t make sense. The parties thrown in celebration for the sheep and coin probably cost more than

the lost items themselves, but that’s not the point. The point is that anytime something or someone that is “lost” is “found” – it is worth celebrating. Before blaming or finger-pointing or anything else, celebration is the first reaction. God’s love and grace may defy our logic, but aren’t we glad that they are the things that define our life?

And this is what we see with Jesus as he sets the table for these three parables in response to the grumblings of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus does not ask the tax collectors and sinners to change their behavior first before he welcomes them to the table; he doesn’t ask them why they sin so much; he just welcomes them, and we aren’t privy to the conversations that follow. We know in other cases that Jesus says, *“go and sin no more”* and we can assume that Jesus at some point probably said something similar to these folks, but the first act is one of welcome – being claimed and named as one who is worthy to

³ Howard, Jacobson, and Koester, *ibid.*

be at the table – no matter what we’ve done.

Which leads us to third parable. This story is familiar to so many of us. The younger son makes a lot of choices that land him in trouble. He’s selfish and reckless and hits rock bottom. He eventually wises up and in humility goes home to seek forgiveness, but before he can even say a word he finds himself swept up in the embrace of his father who’s so overjoyed that even as the son begins apologizing he’s already busy with the logistics of party planning. *“Get a robe and a ring and sandals, kill the fatted calf...Let’s get this party started!”* (vs 24).

The story could have ended here. It’s how the first two stories ended. It would have been a great ending and truly, it is GOOD NEWS to know that when we deliberately make choices that are unwise and harmful – to ourselves and others – we are still welcome in the embrace of God.

At least, it’s the good news if you are the one who knows you are “lost” and needs to be “found.” But what if, like the scribes and the Pharisees and many of us, you think of yourself as already being “found” and never being irresponsible enough to become “lost” in the first place? What if you’re the one who has always done the right thing? What’s the good news here for those who don’t have a cinematic redemption story of “hit rock bottom – have a grand epiphany/come to Jesus moment – then turn your life around and do good forever”?

Well, the older brother, the eldest son can relate. He sees nothing good in any of this news of his little brother’s return. He’s angry and hurt. You can hear it in his language as he talks to his father. He doesn’t want to claim them as family, he lists off the ways he thinks he’s been wronged because of how responsible he’s been his whole life. And to top it off – he’s never even gotten a goat! In his words we feel the depth of his pain and

hurt. Resentment had built up;
he felt unseen, unheard,
unappreciated,
unacknowledged.

So many of us can relate to this older brother/eldest son. I know you can because I've heard so many of your stories; how you are the one in your family who handles everything because no one else is responsible; or you have to be the peacemaker or the go-between because everyone else doesn't talk to each other. How you are caring for your parents in their old age with more compassion and responsibility than they cared for you as a child. How you are the one that didn't succumb to alcohol or who changed your life choices to care for someone who was ill, and the list goes on. Whatever YOUR story is for how you describe yourself in your family system, there are many who probably feel more like the older son more often than the younger son. Others would say the opposite.

But this comparison game
(which is often sibling rivalry)
is not what God wants for us,

nor is it life-giving or helpful for us. We may feel a temporary high of being "better than" or feeling like we "did something good" or we may feel like we absolve ourselves of guilt by saying "at least I'm not THAT bad." But in the end, that feeling is temporary and it leads to grumbling. And after a while, grumbling gets old; even if it's just to yourself.

Relationship dynamics are complex. None of us knows the full story of another, even the full story of those in our family, and none of us knows the full story of this father and his two sons. What we do know is that both sons seem to be lost, but just in different ways. They both make choices that lead to difficult emotions – one through "staying at home" and another through "straying from home." We get to see how the one who strayed finds welcome again at home after being gone. We don't know if the son who stayed is able to accept the welcome he's always had. The father tries to gently explain this to him. *"There's is not just one fatted calf. There is not just*

one night to party. There is not just one inheritance to be had. All that I am giving your brother and have given him, I've also given to you; it's here, right before you – and always has been. My love, my presence. We've always had one another; that does not change now that your brother is home, what changes is that it's not just two of us that have each other, it's three of us now."

We like redemption stories in the movies, but not as often in the lives of those who have hurt us or harmed us. Because for many of us, that person's redemption feels like it came at a cost to us, and why should we celebrate bad choices. But that's our pride speaking; because it's not about celebrating the bad choices; it's about rejoicing that regardless of our choices, God welcomes us all. We all need redemption of some sort. And it's not like the older son's choices are necessarily worth celebrating either – because it feels like they were causing more resentment and pain for him

than they were giving him life and purpose. But maybe this is his moment – to find himself 'found' in a new way. Just like the moment his little brother had as he was feeding pigs. Transformational moments in our life don't just come when we're at rock bottom; sometimes we're lost even when life is coasting along pretty smoothly on the surface.

And the good news remains. No matter our place in this parable. God's grace is for ALL of us – whether we have strayed or stayed. Whether we come home on our own volition or whether we have to be searched out and sought after.

Whether we feel lost or found, celebrate or sulk, grumble or gloat, God is there. Always. Jesus does not turn any of us away from the table.

You see when Jesus tells these stories, it's not just to emphasize that tax collectors and sinners "can be found," but that the Pharisees and scribes can be "found" too – because they aren't exempt from being

“lost.” In fact, their grumblings show that, at least temporarily, they are “lost” to the ways and means of God’s grace. They’ve forgotten that the whole point of the good news is to have as many people partaking in it as possible.

Perhaps you sometimes forget this too. I know I do. So how can we remember? Well, I think the most tangible takeaway from this trilogy of parables comes before the parables even begin – with the grumbling. Grumbling is a great litmus test; easy to identify in ourselves. (And by the way grumbling in your head or to yourself counts just as much as grumbling to others.)

Who are the people you’re around when you grumble? What situations or issues tend to set off your grumbling? Do you tend to grumble when you’re learning new things that stretch you – at church in a sermon, or watching the evening news? Do you tend to grumble when you feel excluded or when you’re worried? Does it happen always

at one place (like work) or with one certain family member? Is it related to how rested you are or how stressed? Is it related to whether you feel well or whether you are suffering?

Grumbling can be completely warranted; we are only human after all. But when we catch ourselves grumbling, it probably means we have something more yet to learn about God’s grace and the expansive welcome of Christ. In this way, grumbling can be our teacher. That perhaps there is a perspective beyond the one we hold. That perhaps our discontent is related to our discomfort of what it means for us when someone else is invited to the table, or even invited to a seat that we used to think was just for us.

God’s grace invites us to envision a table for all. Which means whatever seat we’re sitting in, is probably going to get shuffled a bit. It’s impossible to keep inviting more and more people to the table while staying in our own chair; we have to do some

moving and shaking –
internally and externally. And
moving and shaking is different
than grumbling!

Grumbling is so often rooted in
scarcity thinking; there's not
enough of something to go
around – whatever it is, even
something as concrete as a
fatted calf. Moving and shaking
is rooted in abundance thinking
– that there is more than
enough love, more than enough
rights, more than enough
healthcare, more than enough
food, more than enough
resources, more than enough
grace for EVERYONE to
partake. We just may have to
move around a bit to help it all
shake out. To help us all find
our place at the table of God's
grace.

If we are willing to have these
teachable moments, perhaps
our grumblings can be a
gateway for new understanding
and new living – teaching us
something about God's grace
and how we might be limiting
it. Because almost always,
God's grace is more amazing

than we make it out to be – for
us – and for everyone else too.

Amen.