

“Yes, We are Complex...and God is Compassionate.”

Third sermon in Lenten “Yes, And...” series: Challenge + Celebration

Yes, life pushes you to your limits...and celebration can come in unexpectedly places.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (NRSV)

This story is one of the most well-known parables of Jesus. Of course, to say something is well-known does not necessarily imply that it is known well. As one person put it, “*Perceived familiarity is a formidable obstacle to learning, particularly the kind of learning parables intend to foster and provoke.*”¹

You see, parables challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but don’t always want to acknowledge to acknowledge.²

Parables are not fables. Meaning, they do not have an easily identifiable “moral to the story” that we are supposed to take away from them. Nor are they allegories where we are

automatically supposed to know that one character represents *this* and another character represents *that*.³

Actually, the term parable comes from the Greek *para* “along side, together with,” and *balo*, “to cast,” “to throw”. Together, then, the word parable means “*to lay or to cast alongside.*” Parables are stories, narratives laid alongside our lives, and they invite us in not to teach us a moral, but to activate our imaginations and ignite questions.⁴

“Like a poem, a parable will evoke numerous interpretations; [and so] it is our job to sort through them,”⁵ and to remain open to what it might be saying to us today.

I’m guessing you all have your own interpretations and

¹ Jacob Morris, “Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32,” *A Plain Account* (26 Mar. 2019), accessed on March 31, 2019 at <http://www.aplainaccount.org/luke-151-3-11b-32/>.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperCollins Publishers: New York, NY) 2014: 1, 3.

³ Morris, *ibid.*

⁴ Morris, *ibid.*

⁵ Levine, 7.

understandings of this parable from Luke 15, which as you probably know, is not the only parable in this chapter. The Parables of the Lost Sons follows the parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. In all three stories what has been lost is found – and there is lots of happy hoopla to follow! The shepherd calls his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him that he found his one sheep out of a 100 who had wandered away, the woman calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate with her that she found her one lost coin out of ten that she had misplaced, and the father calls the whole household together to kill the fatted calf and have a grand party because he found his “lost” son.

So this series of stories that Jesus is telling both the Pharisees (the religious folks of the day) and the “sinners and tax collectors” (the less than religious folks of the day) are ones that depict challenging circumstances (something is lost) – that then have a resolution (something is found) – that then warrants a celebration (let’s celebrate and rejoice).

What’s tricky about all this is that when read back to back, we

can think that the third story is just as resolved as the first and second stories. But it’s not, is it? Coins and sheep are one thing. Humans are a whole different ball game. Especially humans that are connected as family. There’s nothing more complex than family is there?

One of the reasons family relationships are so complex is because there are a lot of presuppositions and expectations (spoken or unspoken) that we bring to family relationships that we don’t bring to other relationships. As in – family members are supposed to love one another. Family members are supposed to look after one another. Family members are supposed to be loyal to one another. Family members are supposed to stick together. Family members are supposed to understand one another. Family members are supposed to be honest with one another...be on the same page about values and goals and ways of living...it’s family, after all!

Here’s the thing though – all of these “supposed tos” that we associate with family are not hard wired into our DNA like our skin color, facial structure, or athletic or musical ability.

We can look like someone, and still not love them. We can inherit talent from someone and still not share the same values and goals they do. We can talk with the same accent as someone, and still not talk honestly with them.

If anything – when it comes to family – we have to work harder at those relationships than any others in our lives. But often we don't put in that work, because it's easier not too...we'd rather just swallow our comments and not say anything "to keep the peace." Or sometimes we talk more hurtfully to those we love than to perfect strangers. Why is that?

Your guess is as good as mine. My only answer is that humans are very complex. And when put in automatic relationship with one another (as opposed to chosen relationship – like friendship), our complexities shine in all their glory.

This particular parable invites us to think about our own relationships within our family – our reactions, our presuppositions, our resentments...who or what we take for granted and who or what we love, who or what we are afraid of losing and who or

what we overlook right under our nose.

So today I us to look at each character in this parable – and dive more deeply into their role in this family system...and what may or may not have made them act the way they acted in this one moment in time. Sure, this is all speculation on our part, but of all the writings in the Bible, parables are ripe for speculation. They are not about right or wrong. Rather they are about revealing to us something new about the kin-dom of God. Notice I said *kin*-dom of God, that is, "family of God." And this parable, perhaps more than most, gives us insight into that family aspect of God's *kin*-dom.

First – the younger son. God only knows what he was thinking when he asked his dad for his share of the inheritance now to go off and travel. I'm a younger sibling. I can't speak for my older brother, but I do know this...of the two of us – I am the one that went far away to grad school (Boston, MA is pretty much considered a foreign country to Texans!). I've traveled to more countries than my brother...and random countries at that – I'm heading off to the Republic of Georgia

next month! And ultimately, I have settled in a different state – which is pretty much heresy when you’re from Texas – “*why would anyone not live in the Lone Star State?*” What can I say? I’ve always been drawn to new things, places, and experiences.

So I guess I do empathize with this younger brother – he wants to get away...he wants to see the world. Maybe he was a dreamer and just wondered what life was like outside of the family farm. Maybe he had good intentions initially – like any young person who wants to take a year off and backpack around the globe or study abroad a semester or work at ski resort for a year or join the Peace Corps.

We don’t know this younger son’s intentions when he asked for that inheritance. My guess is that he didn’t *want* to squander it all (who *wants* to go broke?) – even though that’s what ended up happening. Families never really talk about money so I wouldn’t be surprised if he never learned about interest rates on credit cards. Whatever happened – he didn’t manage his money well – and he found himself in a challenging situation. Which would have been hard enough.

But then something else happened that had nothing to do with him. A severe famine hit. He was already down on his luck because of his *own* doing – and now that was compounded by this natural disaster of a famine. He was really in deep now.

The text says, “*he began to be in need,*” (Luke 15:14). Sometimes it’s not until we realize that we can’t do it all on our own that we wake up in life. Independence is an alluring and elusive thing...it’s also not how we were created to live according to the Bible. We were created to be dependent on one another and God. And at rock bottom, he recognized his need. So – he actually did something smart – he went and got a job. It was a job that may have put a roof over his head, but it didn’t feed him. And he found himself very hungry.

And that hunger drove him home.

Hunger is a powerful force. Some of you have been truly hungry for food...literally...I know. Others of us have not ever experienced that literal food hunger...but we have been hungry for something else – a job, a relationship, a sense of self-worth, a cure, a

scholarship, a win, a fresh start, a meaningful faith. Hunger creates a drive in us that we want to satiate – no matter what it costs us (even our pride).

You see, hunger for something different is what led the younger brother away from home in the first place...and hunger for food and stability is what drove him back home.

“The grass is always greener on the other side,” they say. But what if you say that while standing in a field of *really* green grass? When do we learn to have eyes to see the true color of the grass around us? How to cultivate a gratitude for what we have that is stronger than our longing for what we don’t have?

Of course, as the story goes, the son makes it home, and he is welcomed as he thought he would be. His father embraces him and he only gets out the first line of his speech out before his father calls the slaves to get the best robe and sandals on him, to give him a ring, and to prepare the fatted calf for a great party. Was he truly sorry? We’ll never know.

But it begs the question for us – when we do something less-than-stellar and are welcomed

and forgiven easily – or maybe even if our poor action or choice is never really even acknowledged or recognized – do we think, *“Whew...I got away with it! They don’t even care what I did...”* OR do we think *“I’m grateful they’re being nice about this but I still have reparations to make...I want to make things right, to show them how I’ve changed...”* We don’t know how the younger brother reacted – we can only think about what we would do.

Then there is the older brother. If you’ve been the one to stick around and always do the right thing and follow the rules – then you may quickly identify with the elder brother. He is doing what in that day was “the right thing to do.” Here’s what I always wonder about him:

He could have left too...why didn’t he? Loyalty seems to be taken as an untouchable virtue in a lot of families...but just one chapter before this one, in Luke 14, Jesus says, *“If you come to me but will not leave your family, you cannot be my follower. You must love me more than your father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters—even more than your own life!”* (Luke 14:25-26).

The older brother may have been working his whole life for his dad – but to what end? To just satisfy his father's desires for his life? What about his Father's desires? Now if the older brother was actually taking joy in his work – that would be different. If this is the life he wants and chooses for himself, great...but it seems like he thinks he's stuck here. And it seems like he sees himself as morally superior to his younger brother because he stayed...or at the very least it seems that he has some anger and resentment.

Mostly though, I think he is craving recognition for his duty and loyalty. While standing outside of the Welcome Home Extravaganza for his brother, he says to his dad, *"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with friends,"* (Luke 15:28-30).

It seems that beneath these emotions of anger and resentment is a deep desire to be seen, to be recognized, to be acknowledged for what he has done, yes, but also for who he is – a devoted family member...an equally beloved

son. You don't have to travel the world to have an existential crisis and wonder *"who am I and what's my purpose in life?"* I'm sure the older brother had this thought many days. And I'm sure he longed for some external validation from his dad that he was doing the right thing.

We all long for this don't we? The thing is, that is a question that only we can answer...with God. It's not something anyone else can answer for us – not even our beloved parent.

I actually wonder if this was the first time the older brother had ever expressed to his dad his need for affirmation or acceptance or validation. If not – this is a true breakthrough. And it speaks to the power of honesty in stating our needs. That is not something we are taught to do...to say to our loved ones what we need. We assume that they know or we hope that they'll just give us what we need without us having to ask – but in reality, that is not fair of us. How can we expect them to read our minds?

That only happens in scripted romantic comedies. And our lives don't have scripts. And so resentment builds and

misunderstandings abound when we are not honest with our feelings. It seems that the older brother felt like his dad didn't love him as much, and in confronting his dad, his dad is able to say, *"That's not the case at all...I do love*

you...always...AND...My love for you does not preclude me from also loving your brother."

The older brother is probably thinking about love as a limited commodity. The more love his dad gives to his younger brother, the less there is for him. But love isn't like that. I think that's a lesson we all take a lifetime to unlearn...this idea that we have to earn love or that there is some measuring stick we are up against and we have to be better than others in order to get more...when in reality – there is more than enough love and acceptance to go around. That is the truth of God's *kin-*dom even if it's a hard truth to grasp.

And finally – there's the father. A guy who is just trying to be a good dad. There is no manual for parenthood...and just because your kids grow up and you are not longer "parenting" them...the fact is – your sons are always your sons.

The father willingly gives his younger son his inheritance.

Nothing in the text says that the father doesn't want to give it to him. He could have said "no" – that would have definitely been his right. But maybe he even gave it with some excitement – blessing his son on his journey in life – wherever it may lead.

At some point, of course, after he had not seen his son in a long time, we can imagine his grief and worry and anxiety. And even if he was upset with the lack of communication – when his younger son walks up to the farm and comes home that day – he is overwhelmed with joy. He embraces him without hesitation. And what parent wouldn't? Even if later you were upset with how he spent the money or with the fact that he worried you sick because he didn't call or text...in that moment, you exclaim, *"for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"* That's as real as resurrection gets.

We don't know if the father is speaking metaphorically here or if he truly thought his son was dead...but I imagine it might actually be the latter. And so it seems natural that he wants to celebrate. And in many ways – his response is not different than how his younger son used his inheritance. The father

wants to indulge – to kill the fatted calf, to throw a big party. Money isn't the issue for him – the *found* relationship with his son is what matters. Love is what matters. Connection. Coming home. And so celebration ensues.

And he is paryting when someone alerts him that his other son isn't around. So he goes outside and pleads with him.

Although most English versions begin the father's response with "son," in the Greek, the father's address to his elder son is *teknon*, better translated "child." It is the same word Mary uses when she and Joseph, after desperately searching for their lost son, find him in the Temple: "*Child, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety, '*" (Luke 2:48).⁶

The endearment "Child" begins the father's attempt to reconcile with his older son. In stating, "*You are always with me and everything that is mine is yours,*" the father makes an emotional appeal. In the father's view, the son had never been lost; he has always been with' the father. But what the

father felt and what the son felt were two different reactions.⁷ He didn't realize his intent didn't match his impact.

By the father's understanding, were either brother to be missing, the family would not be whole. He uses resurrection language. The missing brother has been restored; he is home; celebration is warranted.⁸ Yet for the elder brother, he may not have been literally missing, but he was missing his father's love and attention and his father didn't recognize it.

Hindsight is 20/20 and perhaps the father could have done more to show his appreciation for his older son in the ordinary moments of their life together...when nothing dramatic was happening but it was just the day-to-day.

So often we take for granted those in our midst each and every day who are doing wonderful things. We forget to say thank you – we become accustomed to someone's presence and what they are doing and forget to pause and truly acknowledge them. The father needs to hear from his elder son that he has felt lost...and the elder son needs to

⁶ Levine, *Short Stories*, 72-73.

⁷ Levine, *ibid*.

⁸ Levine, *ibid*.

be reassured that he “found” just as his younger brother is too.

In the end, the line that echoes in my ears in light of our Lenten theme of Challenge and Celebration is this line from the father: “*It remains necessary to cheer and to rejoice.*” (Luke 15:32) And yet – as he says this line – he and his elder son are not at the party rejoicing...they are in the field having a real hard conversation. Sometimes it may be necessary to rejoice...and we still may have challenges to work through.

And the parable leaves us asking, “*Now what?*”...it has no easy or comfortable ending or interpretation. What would we do, were we the older son? Do we attend the party? What will happen to this family when the father dies and the elder son obtains his inheritance? Will he keep the younger son in the restored position to which the father elevated him or will he send him to the stables, to be treated as one of the ‘hired laborers?’”⁹ Do we ever get the validation we need?

Does the father ever learn how to show both of his son’s love – in the unique way they need it?

“What do we do if we identify with the father and find our own children are lost? Is repeated pleading sufficient? What would be? What does a parent do to show a love that the child never felt? The parable shows us that indulgence does not buy love, but withholding can stifle it.”¹⁰

And “what are we to make of the younger son? Does he actually change? It is neat and tidy to see him as shattered by grace and fully repentant, but the way real life works...this whole pattern will most likely happen again. It’s hard to get much work done when one is filled with fatted calf. And yet his father loves him, and he is a member of the family. Therefore, he cannot be ignored, and to dismiss him would be to dismiss the father as well.”¹¹

And “if the younger son is seen as truly humble, repentant, and recognizing his dependence on the generosity of his family, how will he act now? What can he do to gain back the respect that his adventures have cost him? The father has provided him an initial act of reconciliation, but at some will

⁹ Levine, *Short Stories*, 74-75.

¹⁰ Levine, *ibid.*

¹¹ Levine, *ibid.*

he respond with renewed responsibility?”¹²

The parable invites us to think about forgiveness and repentance in a more nuanced manner. “In this household, no one has expressed sorrow at hurting another, and no one has expressed forgiveness to another.”¹³

New Testament and Jewish Studies Professors Amy-Jill Levine says this parable doesn’t offer us answers but rather interesting exhortations: 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 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.”¹⁴

“Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate, and invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come later, so

much the better. And if not, you still will 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. Take advantage of resurrection [in whatever form it takes] – it is unlikely to happen twice...”¹⁵

That’s all easier said than done, and may or may not be applicable in your situation. But you see this parable does not tell us how to behave as much as it shows us that human behavior is vast and varied and unique in each and every circumstance. There is no cookie cutter answer or ending to the parable of the Lost Sons like there is to the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin.

We are left with the three characters living in our minds...as we listen to their stories and see what their stories can teach us about our own.

In the midst of our human complexity though – one thing remains – God’s compassion. That is the ultimate sign of the kin-dom of God. A compassion that overwhelms. A compassion

¹² Levine, *ibid.*
¹³ Levine, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Levine, *ibid.*
¹⁵ Levine, *ibid.*

that loves all, without exception
A compassion that seeks for
what is lost to restore it to
found relationship. A
compassion that holds all of our
complexity with grace and
openness and acceptance. A
compassion that nudges us
home. A compassion that
compels us to be honest.

People often equate the father
in this story to God. But I'm
not sure why that is
needed...because God is
already in this story...in the
person of the one telling it –
Jesus. We don't need to create
an allegory out of this parable
to see God's love. We need
only to look at who is telling it.
Jesus.

Jesus who is sitting at a table
with the so called "lost" and the
so called "found": tax
collectors and sinners,
Pharisees and scribes. Jesus
who is sitting at the table with
us as well. Telling us this story.
Not judging or condemning
anyone in the story. But letting
them each have their voice –
and their emotions – in all of
their complexity and honesty.
This is the amazing grace of
God...the compassion of
Christ...that is seen in this
story...and that is seen in the
story of your life too. It's a
compassion that doesn't try to

tie everything together with a
neat bow but rather lets the
complexities sit and begin to
work themselves out so that the
celebration can be real...and
can be for everyone...not just a
few.

Jesus' example in setting this
table for some who thought the
celebration was just for them
and not for others is an example
that makes us pay attention to
who is at the celebrations in our
life...and who isn't. Is someone
out in the field? Are we?

I'm willing to bet that in your
own family or friendships there
is a strained relationship right
now...or a relationship that you
wish was functioning
differently than it is.

Take a few days to live with
this father, and his two sons.
Listen to their experiences.
How can their emotions and
responses give you the courage
you need to be more honest in
your own relationships? If
anything, this text teaches us
that we can celebrate all we
want, and even in the midst of
that celebration – other
challenges are still living on or
under the surface. It's not that
celebration removes challenge.
It's just that every time we
celebrate working through one
challenge, we are given hope

again that all the other
challenges will be worth
celebrating one day too.

The good news of Jesus'
compassion and grace rings
through the father's voice when
he says these words about his
youngest son: "*We had to
celebrate and rejoice, because
this brother of yours was dead
and has come to life; he was
lost and has been found,*"
(Luke 15:32). AND, equally
powerful, the good news of
Jesus' compassion and grace
also rings true in these words of
the father to his eldest son:
"*Child, you are always with
me, and all that is mine is
yours,*" (Luke 15:31).

Two complex relationships.
Two compassionate responses.
This family stuff is hard
work...and it's the great work
of the *kin*-dom of God.

May you, too, find the
celebration in your own
challenging relationships...and
may you, too, experience the
compassion of Christ all along
the way.

Amen.