

30 March 2025  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year C  
Trinity, St. Louis  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Joshua 5:9-12*

*Psalm 32*

*2 Corinthians 5:16-21*

*Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

In the Name of the God of all mercy. Amen.

*Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,  
all you who love her;  
rejoice with Jerusalem in joy,  
all you who mourn over her (Is 66:10).*

These ancient words, sung for centuries on this Fourth Sunday in Lent, remind us that the imperative “to rejoice” applies to good times and bad. So, it seems fitting that today we hear a story that only Luke tells us about the child who ran, the child who stayed, and the parent who threw the big party.

In the citation for today’s Gospel lesson, you may have noticed that there is a gap: from the end of verse 3 to the middle of verse 11. Chapter 15 begins, *All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So Jesus told them this parable.*

In fact, Jesus tells them three parables: the one about the lost sheep; the one about the lost coin; then, at last, the one we hear today: the one we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

I grew up in a time when it was common to interpret parables by drawing a contrast between what Jesus taught and what “the Jews” (or the Pharisees and Scribes) thought. In this scheme, the Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches that God loves sinners, whereas the Jews thought God loved only the righteous and didn’t give a fig about sinners.

But anyone who has read the Bible seriously knows that God not giving a fig about sinners makes no sense...unless you decide to forget about Adam and Eve, and Cain, and David. Or that God repeatedly sent prophets to coax Israel back into relationship with God, who has always been waiting for us to return.

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that this interpretation yanks the parable out of its historical context, and in doing so, not only weakens the message of Jesus, but also bears false witness against Jews and Judaism.

In its original context, Levine argues, the parable of the Prodigal Son would not have been heard as a story of repentance or forgiveness. Instead, the parable's messages of finding the lost, of reclaiming children, of reassessing the meaning of family offer not just good news, but better news.<sup>1</sup>

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"There was a man who had two sons." Jesus' listeners would automatically recognize this introduction, immediately recalling other stories of brothers: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau.

There was a parent who had two children. Who are you in this story? One of the children? Both of them? The parent? Has it changed over time? Oh, and what about this word, "prodigal"?

Even though the word is nowhere in the text of the parable, we are wedded to it. According to the leading authority on such things, Google Dictionary, there are two definitions of prodigal. The first is, I suspect, more familiar: spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant. Its synonyms include spendthrift, improvident, imprudent, immoderate, profligate, thriftless, excessive, intemperate, irresponsible, self-indulgent, wanton. That's a lot of synonyms.

You might be surprised to learn that prodigal's other meaning is having or giving something on a lavish scale. In other words, generous, liberal, unstinting, unsparing, bountiful, copious, profuse. Not so many synonyms.

With this in mind, we *could* call this the Parable of the Prodigal Child, or we could call it the Parable of the Prodigal Parent.

True, the younger son wasted his inheritance on dissolute living in a distant land, but his father seems scandalously wasteful in lavishing his wealth (remember the robe, the ring, and the fatted calf) on a son who seems to have come home more out of desperation, starvation, and calculated self-interest, than in what any of us would think of as sincere repentance.

"Sincere repentance." Now, that's a phrase you can just hear thundering around inside the skull of the Resentful Son – the one who refuses to join the celebration.

And what of the Prodigal Parent? The Parent who doesn't refuse the younger child's request to go off into the world. The Parent who waits until the child comes to

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "What the Prodigal Son story doesn't mean," *Christian Century*, Sept. 3, 2014.

themselves and come home, no matter the reason. The Parent who, seeing the child approaching, runs to meet them with compassion and forgiveness -- before the confession is even begun. My friend Gordon Lathrop offers the image of Easter running out to meet us.

This is the same Parent who goes out into the evening to plead with the older child to come to themselves and come inside to rejoice...with the family. The children, both of them, worry about things (or lack of things, or the distribution of things). The parent worries about the restoration of both children.

In our day, it is common to use the term *enabling* for parents who seem to be extravagant with children who struggle with addiction, or other challenges, but this is an ancient parental practice. The first century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (~20 BCE – ~50 CE) wrote that parents don't just stop thinking about "their wastrel (*asoton*) children but . . . lavish their kindness on the wastrels more than on the well behaved . . . In the same way, God too . . . takes thought also for those who live a misspent life, thereby giving them time for reformation."<sup>2</sup>

Since the goal is restoration, I wonder if the three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, prodigal son) aren't misnamed. After all, they're all about finding, and restoration and rejoicing! The shepherd who left the 99 sheep to search out the one that was lost shouted, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." The woman who lost one of her ten silver coins and turned the house upside down to find it cried out, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that was lost." The father with two sons says: "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this sibling of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Maybe we should talk about the found sheep, the found coin, the restored child.

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I am the middle child of five – and that position gave me endless opportunities to decry my parents' indulgence of my younger brother and sister. From such urgent and earthshattering issues as the length of hair to the hour of bedtime, they were allowed more at a younger age. It wasn't fair!

In Sunday School, I was taught that you never wanted to be the younger "sinning" son – but being the "righteous" older son meant you just had to suck it up. Again, not fair. But I wonder...I wonder if both sons were lost to the father. One to irresponsibility, the other to self-righteousness.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that those who see themselves in the older brother's place will surely face their own struggles with self-righteousness. They will

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<sup>2</sup> Philo, *On Providence*.

have to make the difficult decision: to join the party, or to stay out in the cold with their principles.<sup>3</sup> Principles and resentments rarely keep us warm.

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One of the many questions you might ponder in these last weeks of Lent is, “how do I respond to mercy?” What do I do when faced with the overwhelming and unconditional love of God, often manifest in the people who love me? Or what does it feel like when extravagant love is showered on someone else? Someone who, how do you say, hasn’t earned it?

No matter what you choose to call it, this parable of Easter running out to meet you, opens the door to even more questions.

Who are you in this story?

What paths will you follow? How lost might you become?

Will you be lost in a strange place, or lost within yourself?

Can you be found if you’ve never been lost? We love to sing “Amazing Grace,” but we shrink from singing “a wretch like me.”

As we walk towards Easter, what is the resurrection you long for in this season?

Where are the dead places, the lifeless experiences, the heavy burdens that block your new life?

Will you allow yourself to be found?

Will you allow yourself to love more than you judge?

Even when it’s not fair?

Will you allow yourself to be embraced by God? By your family?

Will you allow yourself to join the party?

As you chew on, pray on, these questions, remember that we worship a prodigal God who loves us so extravagantly that God simply will not give up on us, will not let go of us, will not turn away from us ... ever.

Deep in this season of Lent, on this Sunday we call *Lætare, Rejoice!*, the Good News is this: A parent had two children, and loved them both, even (perhaps especially) in the ways that they had become lost. The parent only wanted to welcome both children home. Because that’s what love is. That’s what love does. So, rejoice! Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Prodigal Father,” in *The Preaching Life*.