

Properly-Identified Love

We know the parable (singular; i.e., one teaching lesson with three different examples) appointed for today, don't we? Well...we know it, ***but do we know it as well as we think we do?*** Keep in mind: Jesus taught this to a bunch of works-righteous, holier-than-thou Pharisees and scribes; guys who had a real problem with Jesus hanging out with low-life sinners and degenerates; people who had nothing to offer. And don't be too quick to condemn the Pharisees here. The folks Jesus was hanging out with were the ***same*** people you would tell your kids to steer clear of; the same kinds of people you hope your kids **NEVER** grow up to become—prostitutes, thieves, beggars, crooked politicians/tax collectors...people who've made very bad choices in life.

I say all this because so often we hear this parable (singular), and a couple of major problems get in the way of a right and proper understanding. For starters, as I just said, we forget that Jesus is teaching this parable ***to Pharisees***; to a bunch of works-righteous, holier-than-thou busy-bees. We LOVE to hear these stories, don't we? We love to hear them because we see ourselves in them (always in a good way, not surprisingly). We don't hear these parables like they're being taught ***to us, but rather about us.*** The poor little lost sheep? That's me. Jesus is talking about me. The lost coin? That's the precious treasure that I find each and every Sunday when I come to church; the precious treasure that is Jesus and His love for me. The prodigal son? Well...who here can't see themselves in the role of the prodigal son? We've all wandered away into sin, and we've all wised up and turned around in repentance and returned to the outstretched arms of our loving and gracious heavenly Father. The fact that we're here today bespeaks the truth—our prodigal truth—of this parable.

Folks: ***What if we have it all wrong?*** What if we've got a bad case of ***misidentification*** going on here? Don't get me wrong. The lost sheep that wanders away? Been there, done that...too many times. The prodigal son? Been there, done that, far more times than I can count or care to admit. The lost coin? Well...that is one that is usually ***misidentified, misunderstood, and wrongly taught*** in our day and age. Contrary to popular opinion/teaching, Jesus is **not** the precious treasure that's lost. He's **not** the lost gold coin in the story. ***You are.*** You may not know that you're lost, but neither does the coin. Just like the coin can't "un-lose" itself and find its way back to the master, you can't "un-lose" yourself and find your own way back to Jesus. The corpse doesn't dig itself out of the grave to find its way back to the doctor. **It doesn't work that way.** ***Jesus finds you.*** Jesus seeks you out, pulling out all the stops, shining His light into the darkest places, sweeping and digging until He finds you. That's how ***precious*** you are to Him [*the crucifix*]. Jesus goes into the very depths of hellish wrath and darkness in order to find you, recover you, and lead you out in the divine exodus

from death to life. And all of heaven rejoices with Christ that you have been found and saved, restored to the fold, restored to the family.

As I said before, it's easy to see yourself in these lessons, but what if these parables aren't really *about* us, *but instead lessons FOR us?* That would put us in the same audience as the Pharisees, now wouldn't it? [Remember: Jesus taught these parables to the Pharisees, who were grumbling that Jesus was hanging out with undeserving low-lives and "sinners"]. If these are lessons *for* our ears, that means we're in the same audience as the Pharisees, and that's not a place anyone wants to be. Now, I do understand that even the Pharisees were intended to see themselves in these lessons. This was the whole reason Jesus taught these parables to these guys, especially the parable of the prodigal son. These guys were to understand that they were the angry older brother in the story, who didn't think it was right/fair that dear old dad was celebrating the return of the wasteful moron.

I don't know about you, but I can admit here, too: been there, done that. I can recognize myself in this sad role as big brother. Now don't get me wrong: I do rejoice when *certain people* repent and return to Christ and are saved. I rejoice that the thief on the cross is in heaven. But...that's easy. I didn't know him. What about somebody as foul and heinous as Jeffrey Dahmer? Jeffrey Dahmer is probably in heaven. It's true. He died in prison a repentant, believing, practicing Christian. Jeffrey Dahmer—*cannibalistic serial killer*—in heaven... Something about that just doesn't seem fair or right, does it? Wilhelm Keitel, one of Hitler's top-tier henchmen—general field marshal, second-in-command, as a matter of fact—went to the gallows at the Nuremburg trials with the body and blood of Jesus Christ on his breath, having just received absolution and Holy Communion from the Lutheran chaplain assigned to his care. Six million Jews slaughtered...*and they died rejecting Christ, which means they go to hell.* "No one comes to the Father except through Me. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Six million Jews are murdered in the holocaust simply because of their ancestry and religious preferences, and eternal damnation is what they receive, and yet one of the architects of this barbaric evil genocide repents, holding fast to Christ as His merciful Savior, and is welcomed into the eternal heavenly feast? **That's not fair!** **That's not right!** Hmm...that sounds a lot like the older brother in this parable, doesn't it?

And none of this even takes into account the people in my day-to-day life; the people I know *personally*; the people who I'm convinced are lousy frauds of faith; who (in my opinion) have no business calling themselves Christians, let alone Lutheran. *And yet...God forgives them. He loves them.* He loved them enough to die for them. In His love He continues to search them out by means of His Word. He continues to call out to them; to seek them. And when He finds them, He welcomes them back. He restores them. He bespeaks His unconditional absolution to them. He feeds them and nourishes them with His Word and with His own Body and Blood *as they return to His feast table in repentant humility*

and thanksgiving. Like the prodigal son, they return to Him; they come to Him, not offering their works and deeds, because they know that their works and deeds contribute **nothing** to their salvation. They come to Him, not offering up excuses and reasons for their rebellious desertion, but in Spirit-wrought repentance and contrition. “*Lord, I confess. Have mercy on me, a sinner.*” They come completely empty-handed, bringing nothing but repentant joy; joy in the Truth of Christ’s Word and Promise that “*it is finished.*” They come in repentant joy, sorrowful for the sins they’ve committed and the sin that they are, by nature, coming to Him to receive the undeserved, unconditional, and over-flowing grace, mercy, and peace that **ONLY** the heavenly Father can have and so freely does have for them. God so loved the **WHOLE** world that He gave—willingly, freely, and unconditionally—His only-begotten Son to die for it... for them.

And it’s only when I take an honest look in the mirror of God’s Word that I recognize the fact that ***I’m no different or better or more deserving than any of them.*** Recognized through the lens of the cross, I’m no different, and certainly no better than any other child of Adam. And the same goes for you too. In the eyes of this just and righteous God, we are **ALL** sinners, equally dead in our sin and equally in need of His salvation. In the eyes of this loving and gracious Lord, we are **ALL** beloved and cherished children, loved so much that He willingly took on our flesh so that He could take that flesh to the cross and died for us, putting all our sin to death, once and for all—for all people, for all time.

You know... it’s only when viewed through the lens of Christ’s blood-soaked cross that these lessons come into ***crystal-clear focus.*** These lessons aren’t really about me or you or anyone else. Yes, we can certainly recognize ourselves in all three of these stories. There’s nothing wrong with that (provided we see and understand things the right and truthful way; e.g., Jesus isn’t lost. You don’t find Him. He finds you. If you run away and purposefully stay away from God, then you’re not a poor little lost lamb. You’re a selfish and self-serving prodigal child), but...these particular lessons aren’t really ***about*** us. **This parable—these lessons—are all about God!** These lessons are all about the love that God has for us and for all people; love so deep, so all-embracing, unconditional, and all-forgiving. These lessons—all three of them—are meant to teach; ***to teach us about the cruciform, all-atoning, all-forgiving, and all-merciful love that God has for us and for each and every person ever descended from Adam and Eve.***

Here it is [*Crucifix; Word and Sacrament*]. Here is this lesson, in the flesh. Here is what it means to be rightly and truly “prodigal.” You see, to be prodigal means to be ***generous, bountiful, lavish, and unsparing.*** Here, my brothers and sisters, is the generous, bountiful, lavish, unsparing and unconditional love of your God and Lord. **This is what it’s all about.** May you understand, and rejoice, and be at peace, now and into all eternity. **AMEN**