

# “The Great Banquet”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 7, 2021*

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 15:1-32

If you have ever wondered why preachers have a reputation for giving three-point sermons, today’s readings provide the blueprint. Three parables: three examples of losing and then finding; followed by three invitations to joyful celebrations. The final – and most famous parable – highlights three family members: a prodigal son, a waiting father, and an angry elder brother. The lost is found, the great banquet is set in motion; but will everyone be there?

We are told in the opening verses that Jesus shares these three parables because the Pharisees and scribes in his audience object to Jesus’ regular and intimate association with the so-called “sinners and tax collectors.” The Jewish leaders don’t think this is a very wise use of his time or energy; perhaps, they are even a bit jealous?

This sets up backdrop for Jesus’ question. “Which one of you,” Jesus asks, “does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” Most shepherds, we believe, would be okay with a one percent loss; we wonder, instead, why *would* the shepherd leave the ninety-nine alone in the wild, exposing them to danger?

But the shepherd’s reaction to finding the lost sheep – placing it on his shoulders, calling his neighbors together, celebrating with joy – takes us from the practical into the emotional. Jesus does not want us thinking about what percentage would be an acceptable loss, but about the compassion that is shown for the whole: “the hundred-ness of the hundred.” The shepherd’s willingness to go find the one gives reassurance to the other ninety-nine.<sup>1</sup>

In the second parable, it is not a shepherd who is searching, but a woman; it is not a sheep that is lost, but a coin. While a shepherd may feel a moral responsibility to the sheep under his care; here the woman is searching for an inanimate object. We cannot identify with a coin stuck in under the couch cushion. There is no risk here of leaving the other coins in danger while the one is being

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

found. Still, she is committed to finding it; and though she could blame no one but herself for losing it, she still gathers her friends together to rejoice when it is located; finding the one brings restoration to the whole.

In the third parable, we soon discover what has been lost; the younger son asks his father for a portion of his inheritance and Jesus goes on to detail his *prodigality*: his wasteful and lavish spending.<sup>2</sup> The inheritance is soon gone; the son is so hungry that he longs to have some of what the pigs get to eat.

But, perspective matters; Mark Allen Powell asks this question in three (there's that number again) different contexts: North America, Africa, and Russia: "why did the prodigal son end up where he did?" The answer from Russia? Famine. From Africa? Nobody helped him. And North America? Because he squandered his living. Perspective matters.<sup>3</sup>

The son realizes he would be better off on his father's farm and formulates a plan to go back home, begging to work as a hired hand. On the road, he practices what he will say in that first encounter: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

Still, argues Jewish scholar Amy Jill-Levine:

*First-century listeners may not have heard contrition but conniving. Junior recalls that Daddy still has money, and he might be able to get more. Unlike the sheep and the coin, he has not been "found." Rather, he recovers his true nature – he is described as "coming to himself" – and that self is one who knows that Daddy will do anything he asks. In this planning, the prodigal and the narrator repeat the term father: "go to my father...father, I have sinned...went toward his father." Although Junior speaks of being treated as a hired hand, his repeated paternal language suggests that he still thinks of himself as his father's son.<sup>4</sup>*

But before the prodigal gets to his rehearsed speech, his daddy runs to welcome him. His compassion is like that of the Samaritan who saw a wounded man alongside the road and leapt into action. It is the same reaction Jesus himself has when he sees the funeral procession of the only son of a widow. One who might be considered dead could again become alive.

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon Ringe from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>3</sup> As told by Karoline Lewis, "Perspective Matters"

<sup>4</sup> Amy Jill Levine, "What the Prodigal Son Story Doesn't Mean"

And so, the lost is found; the prodigal is lavishly welcomed home and the great banquet begins. But, unlike the first two parables, the story does not end here. Since there is a younger son, we have always known there must be an elder, but only now are we introduced to him. The older son believes he has been slaving away for his father with no reward; nobody even told him about the party before it was in full force; did they forget to invite him?

We notice at this point that – unlike the shepherd and woman in first two parables – the father here does not do any searching: not in the wilderness for his younger son, nor at his home for the elder, even though – in some sense – they both had been lost. The story ends without us knowing whether the elder brother will move past his resentment and come in to the party. It makes us ponder which is more important: that the one is back; or that the whole, this family of three, is again complete?

Which son needs to repent? Both. Which one deserves to feast on the fatted calf? Neither. And yet, both are invited to join in the celebration. In those days, as it is now, sharing a meal is a sign of inclusion and hospitality. It creates a deep bond among those who eat together. Some, however, prefer not to bond with those who are, in their view, less than desirable; not a necessary part of the whole.

Like many who enjoy the benefits of privilege, the Pharisees and scribes would have likely seen themselves as the righteous ninety-nine who do not need repentance; or the dutiful son who did not dishonor the father with “dissolute living.” Their grumblings that the undeserving would receive welcome at Jesus’ table sound very much like the complaints of the elder son about a celebration of joy in honor of the black sheep of the family. They are caught up in zero-sum thinking; they fail to see that, at God’s great banquet, there is more than enough to go around.<sup>5</sup>

The message Jesus is offering to the Pharisees and scribes – in these three parables – is that they are not being harmed by others being welcomed; they are all being invited to the party; what belongs to the father is already theirs.

In this particular season of Lent – as we struggle with when and how to safely re-engage as citizens and neighbors; as we question theirs and our own need for repentance; which, as you may remember, means a change of thinking or perspective – we can see the “lostness” of all three characters in this third parable.

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<sup>5</sup> Audrey West from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Lent helps us to see the reasons, the circumstances, which lead to suspicion, severed relationships, and unwillingness to admit our own faults. Lent helps us to see when and where we only think of ourselves, rather than the wholeness of the whole.

Sometimes, it can be hard to be a part of the ninety-nine. Including everyone does not always seem efficient or equitable; so much focus is placed on the lost that those who never left and are standing by can feel forgotten. But what ultimately matters – to God, the great searcher – is the finding. Sometimes, we fit in and belong; other times, we are the outcast or the lost; but home is the place for the lost and the found: the lost who leave and the lost who stay.<sup>6</sup>

Friends, the table that we are invited to today offers a foretaste of the great banquet where a seat awaits us all. We need not be deserving of the invitation. We don't need to understand the what or when or even why of the party. But, be assured that through the life and death and new life of Jesus – these three – we are each wanted and welcome; the celebration is for us; all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Mitzi Smith from *WorkingPreacher.com*