

March 17, 2019
Lesson 16: Calling the Lost
Scripture: Luke 15

Context:

If Jesus could have had a major in college, it probably would have been in communications or storytelling. Throughout his ministry, Jesus knew how to get his point across. In the case of teaching, Jesus knew that the people who gathered around him would not learn by bullet points or lectures. He knew that this was an oral culture in which people loved to convey meaning through stories. How better to get a point across than to give tangible examples that people see in every day life.

Parables became one of Jesus's primary teaching tools to help people understand God and how to do life together. These seemingly ordinary and strange stories held a heavenly meaning when shared with those around them. All of the gospels have parables, but the Gospel of Luke has probably the most extensive collection associated with Jesus.

The parable for this week comes in a list of stories that Jesus tells that are more known for their negative features than their positive ones.¹ These are the stories about the "lost" sheep, the "lost" coin, and the "lost" son.² Often the story of the "lost" son is translated to the story of the "prodigal" son. However, while reading the story, one of course notes that the meeting is about more of the family dynamics than just the son.

For years, the focus of interpretation in this story has been on the waywardness of the son who leaves home to go off with his inheritance, and the lavishness of the father when he returns. But then there is also the question of what to do with the older, more responsible brother. Preachers and teachers for years have struggled to understand how to present all sides of the text and where we find ourselves in this parable.

However, what if this parable was about something else instead of projecting God as the loving father and humanity as either the wayward son or the responsible, yet upright son. What if this was a parable about grace for all parties, including the father who was torn by both sons and their competing rivalries for one another? We might get a better glimpse at understanding the text if we read it as if we were a part of Jesus's original audience.

There are a few things from the historical context that might help us understand the parable. According to Jewish custom in the first and second century, a younger son would receive one third of the inheritance that usually came at the father's death.³ While hearing this parable, the people would have been shocked that the father would respond to the son's request. Something is not right for that to happen. Lines have been crossed.

So it should come as no surprise when the lost son returns home and the other brother is given a party. Of course the older brother is upset. Now, his inheritance will be

¹ Fred B. Craddock, "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1990), 186.

² *Ibid.*, 186.

³ *Ibid.*, 187.

even more divided. And the father will now have to deal with two sons who have experienced pain and alienation from their father. There is a tension in which they will have to live and all parties will have to learn about grace. The father will have to receive grace from the oldest son. The lost son will have to receive grace from his father and brother. And the oldest brother will have to have grace with a wayward brother and a father who messed up royally. This story is about grace for all and wrestling with the tension that is life.

Application

Grace is often something we love to talk about, but sometimes struggle to fully understand or even enact in our own lives. Perhaps the reason it is such a struggle is because grace is a paradox. To receive unmerited favor from someone is so foreign in our world of capitalism and western society.

Yet throughout Jesus's parables, especially the story of the father and his two sons, we see that grace is the bedrock to life together. When Jesus told his stories they were meant to shock people and to make them think about the messiness that comes with life.

I don't know about you, but I find myself living in times that seem pretty messy. Our denomination just went through a conference that seemed more like the blood bath scene in the Hunger Games series. I hear from clergy colleagues about churches where people are functioning more like the comment sections of major news sources than body of believers. People gossip about one another and even make people scapegoats for their own issues. Even in family situations where I give counsel, I see people jumping to accusatory modes and defensive positions instead of dealing with the fact that everyone is miscommunicating and that all have contributed to the problems.

Our world is one that functions more on anxiety and tension than it does grace. We have lost the beauty of the grace God has given us as sinners. Instead we have taken that beautiful gift and for our own purposes have used it to become punitive. We say that you will receive grace if you only agree with me. In churches, we only give grace if it benefits certain people or certain groups. In family systems, grace is only given if you see things my way and do what you're told to do.

Jesus's parables were told as a way for us to look at how God relates to us and how we relate to others. If we walk away with simple solutions after parables, then we have missed the point of them. They are meant to challenge how we think and how we relate to one another. In the messiness of life, the thing that we are called to do is to offer grace to one another. When we neglect to do that, we throw away that precious gift of God's grace that was given to us.

As you think of the story of the father and the lost sons, think of the grace and redemption for all parties that is found there. Are you just in all your relationships? Do you equip and empower others rather than coddle and fix a loved one's issues? Do you give grace to your relatives and to others when they mess up? Do you give grace to yourself when you mess up or veer off the course? At some point, we will all encounter messiness in our lives. How will you respond to those around you?

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