

Some time during college I realized I didn't really know what the word *prodigal* meant despite it being in the title of one of Jesus' most famous parables. #Prodigal—spending resources freely and recklessly or giving on a lavish scale. After looking it up I wondered if parable should have been name *The Prodigal Father*. While in seminary a professor pointed out that she though this story was inaccurately named, naturally my ears perked up, she pointed out that this story was the third in a series of stories about lost things: the lost sheep, the lost coin and this story, the lost son. As you listen I invite you to wonder about the name of this parable: the prodigal son, the lost son or the prodigal father?

Read Luke 15: 11-32

Which title best fits this story?

This story, the third Jesus told in response to the Pharisees and scribes complaints that he was eating with sinners or those people. The first story was about a shepherd having 100 sheep and loosing one, leaves the 99 to search for the one and when he finds it he rejoices. I'm going to venture a guess that none of us have been shepherds but we can still understand that no-one leaves 99 sheep to look for one lost sheep because you risk loosing the 99. It's crazy. Jesus says there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner then over the 99 righteous people that need no repenting. The second story is about a lost coin. The coin is significant it could be the money that would feed the family for the week or month, but the craziness is that once the woman finds the coin she throws a party perhaps spending the money she had found. There is a foolish joy that is beautiful about both of these stories. They seem to make no sense but when joy grans a hold of you logic's grip loosens. It is

this foolish joy that is at the heart of the gospel. It is this foolish joy that Jesus uses to answer the Pharisees complaint, "Why is he eating with sinners? Because Jesus found them, because its fun, it brings Jesus and all of heaven joy.

The first two stories talk about repentance, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents, but the third story, the one we read, never mentions repentance. In the first two stories sheep and coins can't repent, they've been found, they are passive in the process, they just are. The story we read never says the prodigal son is repentant. Should we assume the younger son repented or is the third story like the first two, is the son like the sheep and the coin, does he do nothing to participate in his being found, for him to repent was simply to be welcomed back into the household. It seems that just showing up qualifies us for God's abundant love and forgiveness. It's not about what you do but that you are. God loves you with no strings attached.

This is good news and surly news for rejoicing and that is the way the first two parables end, with rejoicing, but in the third parable the oldest son can't rejoice. Do you have a younger brother or sibling that has manipulated the family, acting like snake they tug on the heart strings of a parent who can't say, "no." Looking at this facet of the story—the father represents God—we ask, "What does this say about God?" I don't think it means that God is an idiot but few years back in confirmation a young woman raised her hand as we discussed this parable and said, "That isn't the way you parent. You have to let your

kid suffer the consequences of their actions or they will never learn.” There is truth to that but this parable isn’t a panacea, a cure for all ills, the story is told in response to the Pharisees complaints about Jesus eating with sinners and what happens in the story is that the younger son miscalculates what it takes to be a member of the family. His motive doesn’t matter, all that matters is he is back on the property. The father, after all these years, is scanning the horizon and sees him and runs, the father cannot wait to bring people back in, whether that makes him a sucker or bad parent is not irrelevant to the point of the story. The point is God engages in joyful foolishness. Jesus loves sinners.

This is good news unless you are the older brother... People do have members of their families or they have been the younger brother and woken up eating with the pigs—they’ve hit rock bottom. But the older brother is working in the field and the father sees the younger son and puts a robe and a ring on him, by the way those things now belong to the older brother by virtue of inheritance because the younger brother has already gotten his half. And no-one even sends a messenger out to tell the older brother what is going on. He comes and asks, “What’s all the noise?” Oh, your brother’s back!” “Oh, the one that devoured my father’s household?” Then he has this line, “This son of your’s...” “you never even gave me a goat.” Is the older son correct is the father a jerk to him, is this another case of favoritism? Or has the older son also misunderstood what it means to be a member of the family. Is he too lost? Has he misunderstood grace? I think so.

In this story two cultures collide. The culture of the Kingdom of God and a cultural value common to us. In this story the older son is alienated from his father, because the father isn’t operating according to his standards of fairness, therefore the elder son can’t appreciate the father’s extravagant generosity. Son one is operating under the assumption that life is a zero sum game: for someone to win someone else must lose, if his brother is receiving love/money/acceptance he must be losing those things. The father has a different value. The kingdom of God operates from a place of abundance. The Kingdom of God is win win. All are welcome. There is enough, there is abundance for all.

Jesus’ point in telling these stories to the Pharisees is that there is enough even for those people, for the ones we label sinners or other. Why are we talking about cultural awareness during Lent? For the very same reason Jesus tells these three stories, to remind us and so that we can better embody the radical abundance that is the Kingdom of God, is for all.