

Introductory

This material is exclusive to Luke, and this pericope is not included in the one-year lectionary. This is yet one more example of a text not included in the one-year lectionary that is included in the three-year. What that means is that people would not have heard the Prodigal Son account from the lectern on Sunday morning – they still don't in churches that don't use the three-year.

The Prodigal is the last of three “lost” parables one right after another. The one-year lectionary does appoint the first two “lost” parables to be read on Trinity 3. Calling this the Parable of the Prodigal Son puts the focus on him and his sin. Calling it The Gracious Father puts the focus on the father and his grace and mercy.

Indeed, perhaps we should call them the “found” parables, since that's the focus and the end of them all. There is joy over the found sheep, the found coin, and the found son, who was also dead. Likewise, the focus for Christians is not on their once-lostness, but on their now-found by God, and in church we rejoice over that and over all the other found souls that were once lost.

Textual Notes

1. Jesus is in the area, He is stationary, and the motion toward Him is on the part of “πάντες οἱ τελῶναι καὶ οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ - all the tax collectors and sinners,” who were “αὐτῷ ἐγγίζοντες – coming close” to Him for this purpose; “ἀκούειν αὐτοῦ - to hear Him.” They were on some level interested, and they wanted to hear more from Him about Him.

These two groups were not highly thought of or respected, and they were openly scorned by many. In the NT, they are often referred to as one group, like we might refer to hippies and pot smokers or hookers and addicts. To be a “sinner” does not necessarily make one a hooker, but hookers would have been included in that category, as well as other very sinful people.

The word means “to miss the mark,” and these were not your average, ordinary run of the mill “we all sin” people, but people who have missed the mark widely and blatantly. At this point, because they have been taught this by their Pastors, the Lutherans may knee-jerk that we're all sinners, aren't we. Yes, we are, but some sinners are worst sinners than other sinners.

A lot of people would be called overweight, but there's a difference between being a little bit chunky, fat, and morbidly obese. A lot of people drink, but there's a difference between a beer before bed, binge drinking, and being a drunk. All people sin, but there's a difference between the ordinary repentant Christian, to the fringe Christian, to the pagan who isn't even trying.

We also look down on “sinners,” but not as much as we used to. The Tax Collectors – KJV calls them “Publicans” – were generally despised for the same reason why I don’t like the IRS; they collected taxes, which are as old as civilized man. Trying to make taxation “fair” is a new thing, and the idea of masses soaking the rich is almost unprecedented in human history.

For most of human history, the winners and those in power have taxed the losers and those who had no power. The Romans won, and they were the occupiers, and the people of Judea were in no position to object to high taxes, and we all know well about the process of collecting taxes in that day and how the system was ripe for cheating, and they did it all the time.

The taxes were not insubstantial;

Judea was in the province of Syria and every man was to pay 1% of his annual income for income tax. But that was not all, there were also import and export taxes, crop taxes (1/10 of grain crop and 1/5 of wine, fruit, and olive oil), sales tax, property tax, emergency tax, and on and on www.bible-history.com.

2. That those people were approaching Jesus to hear what he had to say got the attention of two other groups, “διεγόγγυζον οἱ τε Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς – the Pharisees and the Scribes murmured,” an activity that they often engage in around Jesus. It’s that group that won’t man up and go face to face, but they huddle in a small group and pick at you.

The verb occurs twice in the NT (19:7), and it is an intensified form of γογγύζω, which occurs eight times. www.biblos.com says that the word is “an onomatopoeic term imitating the sound of cooing doves and humming bees.” This is the buzz that goes through the crowd when the person on the stage says or does something unusual or profound or – controversial or shocking.

Like here. They were “Λέγοντες καὶ ὅτι Οὗτος ἁματωλοὺς προσδέχεται καὶ συνεσθίει αὐτοῖς.- saying ‘this man receives sinners and eats with them.’” It’s unclear whether Jesus is right now actually in the act of eating with these people, but we know that He did that sort of thing. The verb means that Jesus did not begrudgingly accept, but instead eagerly welcomed those sinners.

Wouldn’t you say the same thing for most Christians? We want to interact with sinners in the hopes that we can at some point proclaim the Word to them or help them in other ways. We also find that some of the most interesting people are the people who are the most familiar with sin. And of course, we have no choice but to do that, since all people are sinners.

3. Review the basics of the Parable, and maybe mention the first two of these three Parables of Grace, which the lectionary leaves out. I ran the numbers, and it takes less than one minute to read both The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coins. To be sure, The Lost Sheep is also found in Matthew, and is read during Series A, but still...

11. This parable has all the elements of a good story, beginning with the man with two sons, a good son and a bad son, both of whom are sinners, but one is a worst sinner than the other. Stories from Adam and Cain and Abel to East of Eden, which is based on Adam and his two sons (Steinbeck was Episcopalian) have included that element, and we can identify with it.

Jesus likes to tell stories. He's a very good storyteller. Be more like Jesus. I have done things like taken a Saturday storytelling workshop, bought the storytelling DVD from Great Courses, read books about storytelling, and observed people who know how to do that. To be a better storyteller is to be a better, and more interesting preacher. The best sermon sounds like a story.

12. The younger of the two brothers goes imperative on the father, “δός μοι τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μέρος τῆς οὐσίας – Give to me the part of the estate falling to me.” That thing he requested (οὐσίας) occurs only twice in the NT, here and in the next verse, and it means what we would call “estate” or “inheritance.” The imperative mode means that he wasn't asking, he was telling.

The phrase used before “estate” is commonly used in the NT and in other places and often refers to what we would call the “farm” (MM) or used in the context of dividing up property (BAG). This sort of thing would have been about as common in that day as it is in ours; does anybody ever do this? Have you demanded your inheritance? Have your children from you?

If the son's request was shocking, then the father's response even more; “ὁ δὲ διεῖλεν αὐτοῖς τὸν βίον – divided between them his life.” This is a story, the story is the story, but implicit in this exchange is the idea that it does not occur in a vacuum. There is always a history between father and son, and most fathers would have refused outright such a request, but this one does not.

Let's see how this thing plays out. The son explicitly demanded the physical property, and the father goes one step farther; he divides among both sons his physical life. That term “τὸν βίον – the life” is used ten times in the Bible, several times in reference to a person's means of making a living, his all, even his very life, as well as his physical property.

It's the way a good father looks at his children, even the bad ones. If you ever need an organ donor, the first person you ought to ask is your father. If you need a hand up in business or in life, often a father will give of self – in the form of a loan, a character reference, co-signing at the bank – because that's what fathers do. Let's see how this thing plays out.

13. It's hard to travel with livestock, and well-nigh impossible to transport land from one place to another, and it looks like he went ahead and liquified his assets “συναγαγὼν πάντα – gathering it all together,” and that took a few days. Then “ὁ νεώτερος υἱὸς ἀπεδήμησεν εἰς χώραν μακράν – the younger son went away into a distant country.

The term “μακράν – distant country” can mean either distant or remote, and here it's probably both. The picture painted here is of a man who took the money and ran, getting as quickly as

possible as far away as possible from his father and his father's life. More than that, he is leaving one way of life and deliberately journeying to another, different one.

Yet another aspect of this deliberate distancing might be the son's inherent embarrassment for doing what he be doing. To stay is to be reminded of what you have done, and you may even run into your father down at Theisen's. That might be awkward for both of you, and the father would not even have to speak a word of rebuke; the son would know what he's thinking.

Taking the money, leaving one life behind for a different life, “καὶ ἐκεῖ διεσκόρπισεν τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ ζῶν ἀσώτως – there he scattered his estate, living prodigally.” The term “prodigal” does not appear in the KJV, and comes from “Medieval Latin *prōdigālis* wasteful, from Latin *prōdigus* lavish, from *prōdigere* to squander” www.dictionary.com.

It does not appear to have taken him long to squander it all. We are amazed to hear of former professional athletes who have made millions and tens of millions of dollars and they burn through it and we wonder how is that possible. Give me just one of those millions, and I'm set for life. It can be done, and it's actually pretty easy to do, if you know what you're doing.

The verb “to scatter” means that the man spent his money on a lot of different things, and that's one of the ways you burn through a lot in a little time. BAG says that the scattering was done “dissolutely, loosely, of debauched, profligate living.” That's another way to burn through, and it's a way of living that many of us would not live even if we had the means.

14. He spent all he had, and he had no more to spend, and add to that famine, and “καὶ αὐτὸς ἤρξατο ὑστερεῖσθαι – he began to fall short,” and he's in a distant land, not at home. Famine is not nearly as common as it used to be, due in no small part to Norman Borlaug, a good Lutheran from Cresco, Iowa, *The Man Who Fed the World*.

There's nothing that will slow down an economy like a famine will slow down an economy. And people may die of starvation, which doesn't happen as much as it used to. Unless you live in Venezuela, which used to be the richest country in South America, whose Supreme Leader not long ago told the people to eat rabbits. The footage says that actually they're eating garbage.

Famine brings hungry people, and hungry people are restless people, and they will do almost anything to get food. Famine can lead to social unrest and even war. As for the Prodigal, work was hard to find, especially for a stranger in a strange land, and he was hungry and likely in danger of starvation. His new and different life had become a life and death struggle to survive.

15. So “πορευθεὶς ἐκολλήθη ἐνὶ τῶν πολιτῶν τῆς χώρας ἐκείνῃ – going out, he joined himself to one of the citizens of that country.” The second verb occurs eleven times in the NT and speaks of a strong or close bond, as in marriage. That man sent the Prodigal out into the field “βόσκειν – to tend” the pigs. The verb is a present infinitive; tending pigs is now who he is.

If you are not familiar with country life, then you don't think about it, but if you are familiar with country life, then you know that these days you don't really "tend" pigs. They are housed in pens, and seldom see the pasture. In the time of Jesus, pigs would have often been pastured, eating whatever food was available, and it must have been something like herding cats.

16. He got pretty hungry. How hungry did he get? He was so hungry that, “ἐπεθύμει γεμίσαι τὴν κοιλίαν αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν κερατίων ὧν ἤσθιον οἱ χοῖροι – he was longing to fill his belly from the pods the pigs were eating,” that's how hungry he was. That verb occurs sixteen times in the NT, most notably in Matthew (5:28) where it describes a man's lust for a woman.

The Carob pod comes from the Carob tree, which produces fruit. The pod can be ground up and made into bread, and you can find it in bar form in the health food store. That's one thing. It's another thing to want to eat the raw pods, especially considering what and where they were. The pods were raw, and they were lying on the ground, which contained rooting pigs and their waste.

Various books, movies, and TV shows have taught us that starving people will eat anything. Some of the Donner party ate others, and so did the rugby players from Uruguay on Flight 571 in 1972. In County Mayo and other parts of Ireland, accounts abound from the 1840s of dead Irish found alongside the road, mouths stuffed with grass or bark, dead from starvation.

He really wanted those pods, “καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐδίδου αὐτῷ - but nobody gave to him.” Nobody gave him food fit for humans, and he was not allowed to eat the pods, which were for the pigs. As a matter of fact, the pigs were much more valuable than this particular human, and more so during time of famine. The Prodigal had no market value, and he died, you could get another.

17. The man is not stupid, and people often talk to themselves when they are out in the field tending the pigs and maddeningly hungry, and “εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν – having come to himself,” which sounds a lot like an idiom, one that means something like “coming to grips with who he had become” or “in a rare moment of self-awareness” or something like that.

Using logic, he concludes that his father's servants have “περισσεύονται – an abundance” of food, and here “ἐγὼ δὲ λιμῷ ὥδε ἀπόλλυμαι – I am dying of hunger. It was the norm in that time and place for servants or slaves to have too little food, and often they would be worked to death, and for them to have more than enough says something about the Prodigal's father.

18. He reaches the obvious conclusion; that he would be better off a servant in his father's house than as an Independent Pig Slop Contractor. Still talking to himself, he concludes that he must “ἀναστὰς – rise up,” which means that he must have been down, and you almost wonder if he was down on hands and knees fixin' to dig into the husks with the urine and manure marinade.

Then the light bulb went on! Motivated now by sheer desperation and despair at his impending death, he seems to be genuinely repentant of his actions. He determines to go to his father and say

“Πάτερ, ἥμαρτον εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιόν σου – father, I have sinned against heaven and in front of you;” against God, which all sin is, and against the Father, which it was.

19. It looks like the Prodigal is rehearsing exactly what he will say when he gets home. There were several possible ways to tack the whole leaving and returning thing; he could just go back home and act like nothing happened, he could go back home and sluff it off, he could lie about what had happened, but he chose wisely and rightly to repent of his sin.

He will confess to his own unworthiness to be his son and will appeal to his father to “ποιήσόν με ὡς ἓνα τῶν μισθίων σου – make me a hired field hand.” The word for the job for which he will apply occurs only three times in the NT, all of them in this story, and it means what we might call a “day laborer” or even “migrant worker,” whose living is day to day.

20. The Prodigal got up and went to his father, who recognized him from a distance like a parent can recognize his child from a distance, and “ἐσπλαγγνίσθη – he was moved with compassion.” The cognate noun means “guts,” and the verb – which is often used of Jesus – indicates deep-seated feelings or emotion, and you get a lot of feelings and emotion in the Bible.

The verb is in the passive mood, and that’s the nature of emotion; you don’t choose to have an emotion, but something or things happen that cause you to have an emotion. The father’s actions upon seeing the returning son indicate the sort of joy you would expect at a time like this, and later on he puts that joy into action, and later on (32) into words.

21. The son then says to the father, word for word, what he had decided to say while still in that distant land. Lest we think that the Christians invented forgiveness, be reminded that the idea was very much a part of OT theology. To be sure, they did not always do it, and they did not always want to receive it, and in that way they were much like many modern-day Christians.

22. The response of the father to what sounds a lot like a confession of sin is to tell his servants to make a party, and to do it quickly. They were told to fetch “στολὴν τὴν πρώτην – the best robe,” the long, flowing one worn at celebrations, the kind worn only by the upper classes, and we see what we already knew; this is a wealthy, prominent family.

Then, “δότε δακτύλιον – give him a ring” – a hapax in the NT, for his finger. This may have been merely jewelry, but possibly the ring with the father’s seal on it, which would have made giving it to this son highly symbolic, and would also have contributed to the growing angst of the older son at their father’s posture and attitude toward the younger.

Finally, “ὑποδήματα εἰς τοὺς πόδας – sandals for his feet,” which seems to be a purely practical exercise; the man did not have any sandals, go get the man some sandals. Expositors Greek Testament says, “Robe, ring, shoes: all symbols of filial state.” What more can the father do to get across the idea that his son had rejected him, but that he had not rejected his son. Let us see.

23. How about some veal? They brought “τὸν μόσχον τὸν σιτευτόν – the fattened calf,” the centerpiece and main course for the dinner. The adjective occurs only three times in the NT, all of them in these few verses. The word has its root in “grain,” and it means that the calf had been finished with grain, which was unusual, but which produces tasty, marbled beef.

These days, almost all the beef you get in the grocery store or from the butcher is corn-fed. Fresh Thyme in Davenport, IA sells grass-fed beef, and last Wednesday I paid \$3/lb. for it. So does Natural Grocers, and I see Schnucks is giving grass-fed space, and so is the Hy-Vee, but it’s very expensive from those places. Grass-fed is the old way, and grain-fed is a modern invention.

Probably the best cow I ever ate was called “Timmy,” until he was butchered, and then he became “meat.” Timmy lived in the pasture surrounding my house, and he ate grass for most of his short but happy life. Then the other cows started picking on him, so he was fed grain for a short time – just like the calf in this story, which was probably the best cow they ever ate.

Economics dictated that you didn’t feed grain to cows very often. Cows are built to eat grass, and they are not very efficient at turning grain into meat. It takes seven pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef. You get a lot more bang for your buck with pigs – notice pork is a lot cheaper than beef – and chickens are very efficient at converting grain to chicken.

Finally, when all those preparations were finished, the master tells the servants to keep it coming, we are going to party like rock stars, and that would have included the basic elements of any party at any time and any place, but probably no controlled substances. There would have been wine, of course, and a lot of people don’t know that good, clean fun is still fun.

24. It sounds a lot like the father began the party with an announcement, and we still do that sometimes – the wedding reception comes to mind. He talks about “ὁ υἱός μου νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἀνέζησεν, ἦν ἀπολωλὼς καὶ εὗρέθη – my son, who was dead, and he was alive, who was lost, who was found,” and with those words “ἤρξαντο εὐφραίνεισθαι – they began to party.”

You can translate that “make merry” or “feast” or whatever other word is best used to describe a celebration by people of means who pull out all the stops. The verbs of being for the dead/alive and lost/found sayings are all in a past tense, because all have already happened. Recall how close the young man was to actual death, and his initial actions do not indicate spiritual life.

25. Then come the drama, courtesy of the older son. That son was “ἐν ἀγρῷ - in a field,” and we have to ask why he was not at the party. The two most obvious answers are; he was not invited, or he was invited and chose not to go. He comes in from a field, “καὶ ὡς ἐρχόμενος ἤγγισεν τῇ οἰκίᾳ - and as he was coming near the house,” he heard the sound of partying.

The party was clearly put together quickly, without delay, while the older brother was working in a field. That being his location, how would you invite him to the party? Maybe send a message,

but why? He will eventually come in from the field, and he will come home, and he will see the party and come to it, which sounds a lot like what happened here.

26. He located “ἓνα τῶν παιδῶν ἐπυνθάνετο τί ἂν εἴη ταῦτα – one of the children, asking what all these things should be.” The child was likely a servant or the child of one. The son seems to be surprised at what he sees; obviously, it’s a party, but why didn’t he know anything about it, and what was the reason for the party.

27. The boy tells him that his brother has come back, and the fattened calf has been killed “ὅτι ὑγιαίνοντα αὐτὸν ἀπέλαβεν – because he has received him back in good health.” To fatten a calf on grain is a matter of weeks, not hours, and in this both mentions of the cow the definite article is used; the calf has already been fattened, which is how it is ready for a hastily-make party.

The word “good health” speaks to the whole person, and it means that the younger son has come no worse for wear; whole is body and soul. Likely the father and probably this brother had spent time in worry and in prayer, not knowing what had ever become of the youngster. As likely, their minds had raced to the worst possible case scenario, but now he was back and whole!

28. At this point, the older brother had the option to be happy, like the father was happy, at this dramatic turn of events. I have three younger brothers, and I like to think I would have been happy if any of them had been this Prodigal. But no, “ὠργίσθη δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν εἰσελθεῖν – he was angry and did not want to go in” to the party.

The anger is not the righteous kind, but the sinful kind, and it sounds just a little bit like a little bit of a temper tantrum. The father continues to show himself the star of the show and the reason why this parable should be called The Gracious Father; “ὁ δὲ πατήρ αὐτοῦ ἐξελθὼν παρεκάλει αὐτόν – his father went out and begged him” to come in to the party.

29. The son breaks his silence, overcomes his anger, and makes his case, and can you blame him? He points out that “τοσαῦτα ἔτη δουλεύω σοι – for many years I serve you,” and during that time he never once disobeyed a command from his father, and yet his father never gave even a goat – a fattened calf is much better – to him so that he could party with his friends.

30. He describes his brother as “ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος ὁ καταφαγὼν σου τὸν βίον μετὰ πορνῶν – this son of yours, having devoured your life with prostituted,” when he comes, you kill the fattened calf – that’s the third time with the definite article. Maybe they kept a fattened calf around because you never know when you’re going to want veal for supper.

31. The father does not disagree or question the veracity of it all, calls him “son,” acknowledges that “σὺ πάντοτε μετ’ ἐμοῦ εἶ – you are always with me,” and reminds him that all that he has is his; the younger son has already gotten his inheritance, and he will get no more. Everything left will go to this older son, the one who has been faithful, who did not leave.

As for the younger, he may be eating of the fattened calf now, and he may be drinking wine and the like, partying with his friends, but what then? Tomorrow he will be a man from a prominent family who has no inheritance, which will affect him for the rest of his life, everything from his wife – or not, to his children – or not, to what he will actually do with the rest of his life.

32. The father makes an apologia, but not an apology, for his acts, declaring that what he has done “ἔδει, ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου – was fitting, because your brother” was dead, then alive, was lost, then found. We note that the father reminds the older that the younger is his brother – as well as being the father’s son. Party? “ἔδει – Have to.

Let’s look at the alternative, shall we. The lost son comes home, and the father does not throw a party, maybe even shuns him, tells him to get #%@! out of here and don’t let the door hit you... He could have just forgiven him and accepted him back into the family and moved on. He could have promised him a new inheritance. It was important to have the party.

The party held specifically to celebrate the return of the Prodigal is the father’s very public proclamation and announcement as to how he feels about that return; he is ecstatic, and it’s a time of rejoicing and celebration because the son who had been dead and lost is now alive and found, and if you have children you might understand that better.

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