

It's Not Always Obvious

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Let us pray.

Lord, may the words from my mouth and the meditations on all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

One of my early church memories is from Kindergarten Sunday School. The teacher had prepared a lesson to introduce us to the majesty of God and the majestic world He created. After we heard what was no doubt a wonderful story, she did what any good teacher does and asked us if we had any questions. Naturally my hand shot up. My question, as a purely innocent five year old, was simple. If God created everything, then where was God before he created everything? I marvel at the Sunday School teacher's composure – she told me to ask the minister.

At the social hour, I sought out the minister until I had his attention. He was so kind-hearted I remember his name to this day – Rev. John Soltman.

Rev. Soltman heard my question and took it quite seriously. He sat me on his lap and we had a conversation. What was said is long forgotten, but it satisfied a little five-year-old girl. I learned something about God.

Today, for questions like these, which just do not have obvious answers, I have deep gratitude for my faith in Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit...and a wonderful childhood pastor.

In our Call to Worship today, you may have noticed that three parables were mentioned – The parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son.

Just what is a parable? It is a means to teach. It is not a fable; it is much deeper. It is a teaching tool. A parable is a method Jesus used to teach his disciples, the Pharisees, the young and old, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, and everyone else. Parables use metaphors and analogies to tell stories about God's kingdom. There is an obvious truth in the parable, then a less obvious, but deeper truth upon further study. Parables are one of my favorite means of Bible study!

Charles Schultz was a devout Christian. Perhaps the most frequently told story about him is his film *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Without going into the detail of the richness of the storyline, to me the most important part of the story is the struggle Schulz had with the network. The film ends with a quotation from Luke. The network, not wanting to offend anyone, would not air the story with the Biblical passage. Charles Schulz stuck to his principles and would not allow his storyline to be changed – and the film, as it ends in Scripture as Charles Schulz intended, is what we see today. This story and the storyline itself are modern-day parables. Charles Schulz insisted that the network carry the Word of God.

But let us go back to the parables I referenced. There is one that particularly speaks to me today - the prodigal son. However, before we talk about that parable, I'd like us to briefly look at the parable of the lost sheep because it will help us better understand the prodigal son.

In the parable of the lost sheep, a shepherd tends to one hundred sheep. Sheep are valuable – their fleece provides wool for clothing; they are also a valuable food source. Sheep travel in flocks. Upon realizing he has only ninety-nine sheep, the shepherd is distraught. He begins looking for the lost sheep. This is safe for him to do, because the other sheep will stay together. Imagine his joy at finding the lost sheep! The lost has been found! Isn't this the same as God's joy when one of his flock – one of us – find our way back home to God? Again, the lost has been found!

Now let us move on to my parable for today – the parable of the prodigal son.

Let me summarize the story.

Jesus tells the story of a father who has two sons. The younger wants his inheritance early; after receiving it, he goes on a long journey and spends his money foolishly, living wildly. The older son stays at home helping his father. When the younger son ran out of money, he worked at the lowliest of jobs to support himself. After a famine struck the land, he returned home, nearly starving along the way.

His father happened to see him from the distance and ran to his younger son, so happy to see him. The father called for a banquet, to celebrate his son's return.

The older brother was not happy and extremely jealous. Why should there be a feast for his younger brother and nothing for him when he has stayed home all the years tending the fields? The older brother, in his anger and rage, refused to participate.

Why do I like this story? It speaks of so many human conditions that are not always obvious, but that we deal with every day – relationships, asking 'why?', feelings of rejection, feelings of gratitude, feelings of jealousy, experiencing God's grace....

Let's look at each of the three characters in this parable: the father, the older son and the younger son.

Can you think of a time in your life when you have been rebellious? If you are over twenty years old, an honest answer likely is 'yes.'

The younger son is rebellious. He asked for his inheritance while his father was still living! This was without precedent. Did he wish his father dead so that he would have his inheritance? He displays a tremendous disrespect for his father and his father's authority. Likewise he demonstrates himself to be selfish and immature. Then what does he do? In his rebellious, selfish state he spends his money on a

lavish lifestyle, using up all of his inheritance. What is he to do? He has to support himself in order to eat. Think about this. He has fallen from a position of wealth and prominence to needing to find work with his limited skills.

He does find work, feeding pigs. Pigs. An animal that is unclean in Jewish law. He was not even supposed to touch pigs!

Then there is a great famine. He is on the brink of starving to death. The younger son sees no choice but to humble himself and return home, asking his father's forgiveness and for a job.

He did return home, and what did he find? A Father who was overjoyed to see him, and welcomed him back into the family. He relished in a great feast cooked in his honor.

Next let's imagine we are the older son. I would guess that a good number of us have been in this role – we were good kids, did what was right and in general were not a problem to our parents.

In this parable the older son has stayed home diligently working and being a good son to his father while his younger brother was out carrying on with grand parties and just living the 'high life' in a manner that was causing him to go through his inheritance. How does he feel when his younger brother is welcomed home with such fanfare?

We know from the biblical parable that when the older son heard the music and dancing he was angry and refused to participate in the celebration. He said to his father:

"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

Can you relate to his anger? I certainly can. But here is where we miss a key point of this parable. We are forgetting about forgiveness. Would we feel bitter and resentful? The older son is feeling these as well as being self-righteous. He is neglecting the rejoicing Jesus would like us to feel about a sinner returning to God, or in this case the younger brother humbly returning to his father and home. His father gently tries to explain to him:

"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The lost has been found. This seems to be a recurring theme. We saw it in the parable of the lost sheep. Is not a son who has returned to the flock – his family - as worthy of rejoicing as the sheep that was found?

Lastly, we need to put ourselves in the father's role. Have you ever had a time when you were hopelessly frustrated with your child? I would imagine the father was. Here one of his sons – his child – acting in a matter unsuitable for the times.

First, he had offended his father by the mere action of asking for his inheritance. Did his son wish him to be dead? That was the normal time of inheritance.

Second, the father never gave up hope – hope and patience that his child would safely return.

Third, the father had compassion for his wayward son. Thus, he was elated and had celebration upon his safe return. The lost has been found!

This parable demonstrates God's great grace that is bestowed on those who rebel and then return. It is a free gift for all of us. When at the lowest of lows, if your heart returns to God, you will find grace -- the free gift of God's grace. God's lost has been found.

In today's vernacular, let me make some points about the story. Consider your child who has been living high, but not planning for the future. Your other child works steadily, saving, and only living in pleasure within his or her means. Do you love one more than the other?

Likewise, as parents, you have children. One has gone astray – would you not welcome this child with open arms should he or she return home with or without humility?

How does this parable speak to you?

Amen.