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Lent 4C  
Joshua 5:9-12  
Psalm 32  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

Parables don't tell us what to do, or how to behave – they tell us something of the nature of God.

It is important to remember this as we read the parable of the father and his two sons, where both sons seem to serve as examples of what not to do.

But just as important at that, is paying attention to the part of the story that's not included today. Our Gospel begins with Luke chapter 15, verses 1-3 – and then skips to verse 11b. What are we missing?

Verse three begins: *So he told them this parable...* which is a bit of a misnomer, as it actually leads into Jesus telling three parables, two of which were omitted in today's Gospel reading. Before getting to the parable of the loving father and his two sons, Jesus first told the parable of the Good Shepherd and the lost sheep, and then the parable of the woman and the lost coin.

You see, all of Luke chapter 15 is concerned with finding lost things. And all of the parables are told within the framework of the Pharisees and scribes complaining that Jesus was welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners – those who were “lost” to community, and whom Jesus was restoring.

What do these stories tell us about the nature of God?

At the most basic level, we are being taught that God desires wholeness, and will stop at nothing to love us into it.

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In the parable we just read, most commonly referred to as the parable of the Prodigal Son, it’s worth thinking about **who** is the prodigal in this story. Defined as ‘recklessly extravagant,’ prodigal could apply to the son who squandered his inheritance – but it could just as equally, and perhaps even more so, apply to the father, who seems just as free and wasteful in lavishing his love and mercy on a lost son who returns home in shame.

But back to the beginning of the story. It opens with the younger son manipulating his father into dividing his estate and giving him his portion now. In the social mores of the time, the division of an estate would happen at the time of death; the oldest son would receive 2/3 of the estate, and the rest would be divided between other heirs, in this case just the one younger brother. In asking for his share early, the younger son was essentially saying to his father, “You are dead to me.”

Yet the father does as he is asked, and taking his share, the younger son left, and before long lost all that he had been given. When a severe famine hit the land, and with nothing and no one to rely on, that son, in desperation, began to consider returning home.

Did desperation lead him to repentance? Was his plan to return one of calculated self-interest? We do not know, nor is that the point.

The point is, that when he approached his father's home, with the dust rising up from his steps behind him, he was greeted with reckless, unbounded love.

The father, who was seemingly searching the road for the possibility of his return, saw him far off and ran to him in compassion. The son barely had a chance to blurt out his repentance before the father was ordering the servants to clothe him finely and prepare a feast for a celebration.

If the story faded to black there, it would be easy – but it wouldn't be a parable. It would be a story that tells us something about what we need to do to repent and return to God, but not about the fullness of God's mercy. But the story doesn't end there.

Because of course, there is another son – the faithful son who remained with his father.

When he returned from the fields that evening, to the raucous noise of a party in full swing, he was confused, until he heard **why** there was a feast – and then he was full of self-righteous anger and refused to join the celebration.

We can almost hear the echo of the Pharisees and scribes, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*"

And so the father went out to him too, as he did for his other son, with arms extended in love. And just as the younger son met his father's arm with his words of repentance, this son too must say his piece – a lament for years of working hard, being faithful, and not feeling recognized.

The father's response – to plead with this son to come and join the feast – tells us all we need to know about God's desire for wholeness.

For there to be wholeness the lost must be found – **and** the righteous must rejoice.

One biblical scholar<sup>1</sup> put it this way: This parable aims not at calling the 'sinners' to repentance but at calling the 'righteous' to join the celebration. Whether one will join the celebration is all important because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy. **Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus, they exclude themselves from God's grace.**

How easy it is for us to accept God's mercy for ourselves, and how hard it is to rejoice in God's mercy for others with whom we find fault.

How often in our lives does a resentful spirit keep us from celebrating God's grace to others, therefore denying it for ourselves as well?

How often are we too self-righteous to share in the joy, join the party, and be with God?

It is our inability to let go of our false security of righteousness, and join in the mercy and grace of God, that is the ultimate 'lostness.'

As Jesus taught the Pharisees, just because you belong to what appears to be the right group doesn't mean you're found. It is our response to the grace and mercy of God, not only for ourselves but for others, that finds us and brings us into the fold.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, volume 9 Luke.

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We are deep in Lent. The shadow of the cross falls across our shoulders. In this season of repentance, let us take time to repent of ways we separate and divide ourselves: into the worthy and the not worthy, into the saved and the sinners, into the right and the wrong – and all the other ways we turn away from God's call to wholeness.

May the Holy Spirit in all things direct and rule our hearts, that we may rejoice in the wideness of God's mercy and grace, join in the celebration, and delight in the presence of the loving father, knowing that God seeks all of us, with the promise that we all will be found.

~ AMEN ~