

Welcome Home

According to one commentary the parables of the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan are the most well known in the Gospels. However, if you look around there are lots of churches called Good Samaritan, but I have never seen a “prodigal” Presbyterian church. This may seem like an obvious thing to you, because after all who really wants to identify as the good for nothing son who went off and squandered his inheritance and had to come crawling back. We don’t want to own that image, we would much rather be the kind stranger who does the right thing for the bleeding man in the ditch.

Both parables actually contain a critique of organized religion. The Good Samaritan is the outsider, the priest and the Levite (both religious functionaries) are the ones who pass by the injured man. In the prodigal son parable though, the religious folks are not the prodigal himself, they are his older brother. This is clear if you zoom out and look at the context. Luke 15 begins with some religious people complaining that Jesus associates with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus then tells three parables, two short and this long one, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. All three parables share the common theme of finding things that were lost. They are Jesus answer to the self-righteous folks who think he ought not to be slumming around with people of questionable morals. Actually, that is exactly who Jesus should be with, which makes me wonder, maybe there should be more churches called “Prodigal.”

Maybe we need to own the humility that comes from recognizing that God welcomes us, forgives us, restores that which we lost through our own foolishness and inconstancy. Maybe we need to recognize that we are all prodigals returning home after wasting most, if not all, of what God has given us. Maybe we need to feel the father’s joy at the return of his lost son, or the widow at finding a lost coin, or a shepherd finding his lost sheep, maybe then we would be less like the older brother, who seems to have no ability to see beyond his own sense of grievance.

I think there are too many churches out there who should most aptly be named, “The church of the prodigal’s older brother.” I mean, if we’re being honest and real about how most folks feel about this relationship. It goes something like this, “I go to church, I pray, I read my Bible, I’m a good person, that’s why God welcomes me and forgives me for whatever sins I might commit and it’s why I will get into heaven when I die.” Maybe, and this is a big maybe, somewhere in there Jesus hangs on a cross and we feel some gratitude for that as an atonement that makes our redemption possible, but that is not a given in the mind of an “older brother,” and it’s far from a complete picture of what is going on with Jesus anyway.

I read church bulletin boards as I drive around, and while the little things that you put on your sign might seem pretty trivial, I have this feeling that sometimes our most unvarnished feelings make it right out there. And there is a lot of “elder brother” logic on those signs. One a couple weeks ago said, “Everyone gets into heaven. Really?” It may be difficult to express sarcasm in sign form, but if you have talked to a teenager recently, you will know how that “really?” is intended. Look, I get it, cheap grace is a thing we probably need to avoid, but why, when we have such extensive teachings from Jesus about God’s joy at finding lost things, would we scoff at the notion that God might welcome sinners home?

The prodigal repented, yes that is true. Repentance is important, but God wants to give us more than just that. Repentance was the son coming home and being willing to take a lower place. Repentance was the turning away from his selfishness and realizing what he had lost. As one of my favorite lines

from Paradise Lost goes: "Abashed the devil stood, and saw virtue in her shape how lovely, saw and pined his loss." Being shamed, recognizing your mistake is only part of the equation, accepting the welcome of the Father is another. Too much of our religion focuses on that first part, often at the expense of the second. We are not told how the older brother eventually responds. His bitterness and grievance may be much harder to overcome than the prodigal's wanton self-indulgence. The Father's table is open to him too, he wants to celebrate that which was lost being found.

There is this connection between the three parables of lost things, and it is the question at the beginning of the chapter: why does Jesus spend his time with sinners? The answer is that God does not allow his children to stay lost. The older brother part of the prodigal story is like the coup de grace that brings the real point home: why are you upset at the grace of God? That's a question that should ring in our ears as people who have been at one point, a lost sheep, a lost coin or a lost child. Even if you haven't been, or aren't really aware of having been, how does the mercy of God towards others harm you? If you are at home in the Father's house, why would you begrudge anyone else a spot? Do you think that living with the knowledge of God's love and joy is "slavery?" What grounds do you have for that thought?

These questions that the Father asks the older brother are important for us to ask ourselves. Why do we feel grieved if the lost are found? Why do we resent the mercy of God? Why are we not overjoyed at the repentance and return of our brother? Parables are designed to beg these questions. The response of the church to sinners is often "okay, but don't mess up again," when it needs to be a much simpler and more joyful, "welcome home."