

Properly Identified Love

Parables teach. That's the whole idea. Parables tell a story—yes—but it's a story intended to teach. The parable enables the hearer to insert themselves into the story; to see themselves in the story. It's a great way to learn. The stories are all very straight-forward. There's nothing mystical or fairy tale-ish about them. Jesus never told a parable about a big, bad talking wolf or a magical beanstalk or three industrious and architecturally-gifted pigs. Parables use real-life events and circumstances and characters, such as rich men and thieves, gardening, birds and flowers, land purchases, lost coins and precious pearls, sheep, and dysfunctional families. Parables are about *everyday life*, and because this is the case it's easy to see yourself in the parable. That doesn't mean you'll always understand or agree with or believe exactly what the parable is teaching, but nonetheless, it is easy to see yourself in the parable. That's the whole idea. Even the Pharisees recognized themselves in many of the parables Jesus taught. That doesn't mean they agreed with them, but they understood where they fit in to the story being told. They knew what Jesus was getting at.

The three parables appointed for today are a great example of this—the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son. We know these parables, don't we? Well...we know them, *but do we know them as well as we think we do?* I know we can picture ourselves in these parables, but are we seeing ourselves in the proper roles? Keep in mind: Jesus taught these specific parables to a bunch of works-righteous, pietistic, holier-than-thou Pharisees and scribes; guys who really had a problem with Jesus hanging out with low-life sinners and degenerates; people who had nothing to offer. And don't be too quick to condemn the Pharisees here. The folks Jesus was hanging out with were the *same* people you would tell your kids to steer clear of; the same kinds of people you hope your kids **NEVER** grow up to become—prostitutes, thieves, beggars, crooked politicians/tax collectors...people who've made very bad choices in life.

I say all this because so often we hear these parables, and a couple of major problems get in the way of a right and proper understanding. For starters, as I just said, we forget that Jesus is teaching these specific parables *to Pharisees*; to a bunch of works-righteous, holier-than-thou busy-bees. We LOVE to hear these parables, don't we? We love to hear them because we see ourselves in them. We don't hear these parables like they're being taught *to* us, *but rather about us*. The lost sheep? That's me. The lost coin? That's the precious treasure that I find each and every Sunday when I come to church; the precious treasure that is Jesus and His love for me. The prodigal son? Well...who here can't see themselves in the role of the prodigal son? We've all wandered away into sin, and we've all wised up and turned around in repentance and returned to the outstretched arms of our

loving and gracious heavenly Father. The fact that we're here today bespeaks the truth—our prodigal truth—of this parable.

Folks: What if we have it all wrong? What if we've got a bad case of *misidentification* going on here? Don't get me wrong. The lost sheep that wanders away? Been there, done that...too many times. The prodigal son? Been there, done that, far more times than I can count or care to admit. The lost coin? Well...that is one that is usually *misidentified, misunderstood, and wrongly taught* in our day and age. Contrary to popular opinion/teaching, Jesus is **not** the precious treasure that's lost. He's **not** the lost gold coin in the story. *You are*. You may not know that you're lost, but neither does the coin. Just like the coin can't "un-lose" itself and find its way back to the master, you can't "un-lose" yourself and find your own way back to Jesus. The corpse doesn't dig itself out of the grave to find its way back to the doctor. **It doesn't work that way.** *Jesus finds you*. Jesus seeks you out, pulling out all the stops, shining His light into the darkest places, sweeping and digging until He finds you. That's how *precious* you are to Him [the crucifix]. Jesus goes into the very depths of hellish wrath and darkness in order to find you, recover you, and lead you out in the divine exodus from death to life. And all of heaven rejoices with Christ that you have been found and saved, restored to the fold, restored to the family.

As I said before, it's easy to see yourself in a parable. But...what if these parables aren't really *about* us, ***but instead lessons for us?*** That would put us in the same audience as the Pharisees, wouldn't it? [Remember: Jesus taught these parables to the Pharisees, who were grumbling that Jesus was hanging out with undeserving low-lives]. If these are lessons *for* our ears, that means we're in the same audience as the Pharisees, and that's not a place anyone wants to be. Now, I do understand that even the Pharisees were to see themselves in these parables. This was the whole reason Jesus taught these parables to these guys, especially the parable of the prodigal son. These guys were to understand that they were the angry older brother in the story, who didn't think it was right that dear old dad was celebrating the return of the wasteful moron. *"I've been a good boy—the perfect son—all my life, and you don't even give me a goat for me and my friends, but this unholy piece of trash returns after wasting all his inheritance, which he dared to ask you for, basically telling you to your face that he can't wait for you to die—he just wants his money—and you roll out the red carpet and pull out all the stops. It ain't fair!"*

I don't know about you, but I can admit here, too: been there, done that. I see myself in this sad role as big brother. Now don't get me wrong: I do rejoice when certain people repent and return to Christ and are saved. I rejoice that the thief on the cross is in heaven. But...that's easy. I didn't know him. What about somebody so foul and heinous as Jeffrey Dahmer? Jeffrey Dahmer is probably in heaven. It's true. He died in prison a repentant, believing, practicing Christian.

Jeffrey Dahmer—*cannibalistic serial killer*—in heaven.... Something about that just doesn't seem fair or right. Wilhelm Keitel, one of Hitler's top-tier henchmen—general field marshal, second-in-command, as a matter of fact—went to the gallows at the Nuremberg trials with the body and blood of Jesus Christ on his breath, having just received absolution and Holy Communion from the Lutheran chaplain assigned to his care. Six million Jews slaughtered...*and they died rejecting Christ, which means they go to hell.* “No one comes to the Father except through Me. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” (How bigoted, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic of Jesus, right?) Six million Jews are murdered in the holocaust simply because of their ancestry and religious preferences, and eternal damnation is what they receive, and yet one of the architects of this barbaric evil genocide repents, holding fast to Christ as His merciful Savior, and is welcomed into the eternal heavenly feast? **That's not fair! That's not right!** Hmm...that sounds a lot like the older brother in this parable, doesn't it?

And none of this even takes into account the people in my day-to-day life; the people I know personally; the people who I'm convinced are lousy frauds of faith; who have no business calling themselves Christians, let alone Lutheran. *And yet...God forgives them. He loves them.* He loved them enough to die for them. He welcomes them. He bespeaks His unconditional absolution to them. He feeds them and nourishes them with His Word and with His own Body and Blood as they return to His feast table in repentant humility and thanksgiving. Like the prodigal son, they come to Him, not offering their works and deeds, because they know that their works and deeds contribute **nothing** to their salvation. They come to Him completely empty-handed, bringing nothing but repentant joy; joy in the Truth of Christ's Word and Promise that “*it is finished.*” They come in repentant joy, sorrowful for the sins they've committed and the sin that they are, by nature, coming to Him to receive the undeserved, unconditional, and over-flowing grace, mercy, and peace that **ONLY** the heavenly Father can have and so freely does have for them and for all people. God so loved the **WHOLE** world that He gave—willingly, freely, and unconditionally—His only-begotten Son to die for it....

And it's when I do begin to take all this into account; when I begin to think about “those people” and how my God and Lord so unconditionally and so **fully/totally** loves them and receives them, that I humbly and repentantly recognize that *I'm no different or better or more deserving than any of them.* In the eyes of this just and righteous God, we are **ALL** sinners, equally dead in our sin and equally in need of His salvation. In the eyes of this loving and gracious Lord, we are **ALL** beloved and cherished children, loved so much that He willingly took on our flesh so that He could take that flesh to the cross and died for us, putting all our sin to death, once and for all—for all people, for all time.

When viewed through the lens of Christ's blood-soaked cross, the lesson of these parables comes into **crystal-clear focus.** These parables aren't about me or

you or anyone else. Yes, we can easily recognize ourselves in all these parables, and there's nothing wrong with that (provided we see and understand things the right and truthful way), but...these parables aren't really *about* us. **These parables are all about God!** These parables are all about the love that God has for us and for all people; love so deep, so all-embracing, unconditional, and all-forgiving. These parables are meant to teach; *to teach us about the cruciform, all-atonement, all-forgiving, and all-merciful love that God has for us and for each and every person ever descended from Adam and Eve.*

Here it is. Here is this lesson, in the flesh. Here is this lesson, in your very presence and hearing, *right here and right now.* Here is what it means to be rightly and truly "prodigal." To be prodigal means to be *generous, bountiful, lavish, and unsparing.* Here, my brothers and sisters, is the generous, bountiful, lavish, unsparing and unconditional love of your God and Lord. Forget the fatted calf! The very Paschal Lamb of God has been slaughtered...for you! Do see yourself in this story [the crucifix], but see things the right way. *That's not you hanging there, but your sins did put Him there. So did mine.* Here is our salvation; our deliverance from sin; our peace that surpasses all understanding. Here is the feast; the feast of His victorious Body and Blood! All your sin and guilt has been fully and completely drowned in His blood; dead, once and for all time. Here, my friends, is the ever-lasting and unfailing assurance of this blessed peace and grace. I don't care how bad you've been or how many skeletons you have in your closet, here is God's prodigal love for you. **This is what it's all about.**

May you understand, and rejoice, and be at peace, now and into all eternity.

AMEN