

What was dead is alive; what was lost is found

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Our Lord uses three (III) unique examples to teach us about (I) the grace of God and (II) the power of reconciliation.

I

Remember, "Grace" is getting what you don't deserve. This can mean many things, we don't deserve the wisdom contained in Holy Scripture, we don't deserve the sun to rise or our crops to thrive or our flowers to bloom or our children to smile. But narrowly speaking, when we talk of the "Grace of God," we usually mean the grace that leads to salvation. That is, the gift of forgiveness and the gift of Christ's righteousness given by Faith. Saint Luke doesn't record what Jesus said to the repentant sinners and tax collectors, but by the grumbling report of the Pharisees we learn that Jesus both received them and ate with them (**Luke 15:2**). This is not a 'great' sign of affirmation, but Jesus recognizing repentance in the hearts of those sinners and tax collectors, granting them forgiveness, and sitting down to eat with them. "Jesus sinners, doth receive" is not an excuse to sin, but a realization that all who come to Jesus are sinners. All who come to Him are admitting that they are not good, they are not righteous of themselves, but are in desperate need of a Savior to receive them and eat with them.

Saint Luke doesn't record what Jesus said to them, and in doing so teaches us not to run immediately to comfort, but to learn first how to repent. As hearers or readers of Scripture, we must learn that there is a little Pharisee in each and every one of us, and we must hear Jesus' words in order to stop our grumbling. When we stop making those unnecessary and ugly noises, we can learn the humility that lives alongside faith.

In order to teach this quiet humility, Jesus gives them, and you, a teaching in the form of parables. The imagery He uses sticks well in our memory. But each is unique. On top of the biblical truth that God is gracious, we learn about the power of reconciliation, most importantly that Christ is the one who initiates reconciliation.

II

"Oh you Pharisees," says Jesus, "you think you're justified by your family tree and depth of congregational membership, but you don't understand how my Father and I work.

A rancher, who has let his flock out on the range, trusts that the flock will stay together. He doesn't constantly monitor each and every one of his sheep, waiting for them to mess up so he can pounce on the one and bring it shame among the others. But he tends them, and as he tends he notices that one has wandered away.

THOUGHTS & NOTES

If you were a rancher, would you not chase after the one? If you were a shepherd would you not go find the lost sheep? Why do you think my father and I would treat sinners any differently?

"Oh, you Pharisees," says Jesus, "you think that eating and drinking with sinners makes me a silly sort of god, but you don't understand how the God of your Fathers finds people to bring into His banquet.

If a woman lost a tenth of all she owned, she would light a lamp and clean her house to find the list money."

And both the rancher and this woman, upon finding the lost thing, throw a party. They invite their friends so that they can rejoice. And in doing so, they mimic the angels in heaven, who rejoice when one sinner repents.

You see the parallels between the two, right? Searching after something that is lost, calling it found and then rejoicing. But notice the imagery: the lamb is lost in the meadows. It is wholly outside the area claimed by the flock. The Coin is lost in the house. It is in the house, but is in a dark place and must be sought after. Perhaps you can hear it this way: when a Christian wanders far from the Church, the Lord sends out His Word through preacher and layman alike, to draw them back. When a Christian wanders in spirit, but is bodily in the "right place," our Mother the Church (that is, all of us) must search diligently for the coin who is daydreaming instead of praying.

These two are very similar, but there are unique shades to them.

And then we come to the final "Lost and Found" Parable.

It's a beloved portion of our Lord's teaching. *Seemingly* because of its emphasis on grace and forgiveness - but if that were the case we would actually call it the Parable of the Gracious Father. We sometimes like to revel in our sin, or revel in our sinful past (as though the bad decisions we made somehow prove the Bible true). If we really wanted to focus on grace, we would title these in our bibles, "the Parable of the Seeking Shepherd," or "The Parable of the Found Coin." We like to focus on the prodigal son - and this isn't necessarily a bad thing - because so often we see ourselves in his foolish shirking of all good.

But I'd like to focus on the "other" brother. I've read this Parable, I don't know, three dozen times probably. And only a few months ago at our After School Academy did this understanding reach my ears and mind.

(I told you it was brilliant and that I was going to steal it for a sermon and not give you credit and you said "no you should give me credit.)

I won't tell you what she said just yet.

THOUGHTS & NOTES

You see, too often we revel in our sin. This notion of being "lost and found" isn't always as profound as a son squandering his inheritance and eating pig food in a foreign country before returning to church in shame.

Sometimes that is the case. And if it is your case then you should commit this parable to heart and run to it every time your past mistakes creep up in your heart.

But sometimes you – many of you – just ... live a Christian life. You go to church on Sundays, you try not to use foul language throughout the week, you care for those around you, you repent when you fail. Perhaps the most deep, horrid, and awful sin you've ever committed was being a coin that rolled away – but a coin that rolled away within the House of the Owner.

If this is the case, this parable is still for you. Yes, so you can see how the Father deals with the most grievous of sinners, but also - and this was Oakley's insight - to realize and confess with joy that the older son DID receive more.

Do you see? He didn't cash out his inheritance. He kept working, he labored longer and his labor was GOOD. Now of course this other son wasn't perfect. There were times when he bemoaned the Father's goodness and his grace. There are moments of jealousy among the most well-intentioned Christians. What's true in mechanics is true in spiritual care, namely that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. But the mechanic doesn't bemoan the "good wheels" he ignores them because they need less attention. The 99 sheep aren't less loved. The nine coins aren't less appreciated. Though often the three wheels or the 99 sheep or the nine coins may feel ignored, they may feel as though they're not as important because they haven't messed up as much. But they know that they should not sin so that grace may abound. (**Romans 6:2**). Yes, there are times when the most quiet, dutiful, and faithful members may say 'what's HE doing in MY church' and to them the father says

"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (**Luke 15:31-32**)

And here we catch a glimpse into the mysteries of heaven. That the faithful and the dutiful and the virtuous are rewarded (**Matthew 6:19-21**). There are degrees of glory in heaven, even the twelve apostles will sit on thrones judging the tribes (**Matthew 19:28**). This doesn't mean there's going to be a "wrong side of the tracks" in the new Jerusalem. There will be no jealousy, no envy - we can't really wrap our minds around that.

So if you are the "older brother" take heart. Your father loves you no less because of your brother's sin. All that He has will be yours.

If you are the "younger brother," take heart. Your Father will receive you with open arms and set a feast before you.

If you are a lost sheep, know that your shepherd will seek and find you.

If you are a coin who has rolled under the dresser, know that Your Mother, the Church, will light a lantern and search diligently for you until she has found you.

THOUGHTS & NOTES

Whatever your station in life, whatever your past relationship to God was - what matters most, and this matters even more than your greater inheritance or your more precious mansion in the new Jerusalem – what matters most is that you have been lost: by the original sin that swarmed your body when you were conceived, and in this life whether by great unbelief or by the small sins that plague your daily life.

And now, by the Grace of God working through His proclaimed Word and His Promised Sacraments, you're found. Let's throw a party. Let's rejoice. That's what the angels are doing in heaven on this day, why should we act differently here on earth? Let's sing the song they taught us in the "holy, holy, holy" as we prepare to be the sinners, the rebels, the wanderers, the lost who are received by Jesus and eat with Him.

Christ seeks after the lost and by the power of His Word, gives them the new identity of "found." He grips the lamb by its ankles so it can't run away, he polishes the coin and puts it back in its proper pew in the woman's purse. He welcomes the son who despised his baptism and gives him new clothes and jewelry. Do not think so little of yourselves to say "I am not good enough," or "I have wandered too far to be welcome back in." Nor think of those beside you, or those who are no longer beside you, as sheep who are lost forever, or as coins who have rolled to the darkest deepest, corner under the dresser and cannot possibly be found. No one has climbed so high that he cannot fall, nor has fallen so low that they cannot be brought back again. No one has wandered so far or hidden themselves so well that the Lord of the Church cannot find them to tenderly bring them back to their rightful place.

This, not because of the power of man, but because of the desire of Christ Jesus for you to be saved.

You have drawn near to hear Jesus. He has received you.

We have all been found. Let us not use our mouths not to grumble, but to rejoice, and to eat with Jesus.

THOUGHTS & NOTES