

Laura Smith Conrad

Fort Hill Presbyterian

Repentance is a theme during Lent...a time of self-examination and drawing near to God. Today we began worship by lighting the candle of repentance. Last week Jesus warned us repent or perish. Today in three parables Jesus introduces the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. When each one found, everyone celebrates; well, almost everyone.

Jesus says, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 respectable people who do not need to repent." (Luke 15:7 Good News) And that the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:10 GNT). Then he tells about a man who had two sons. Listen to the third parable about the lost son who is found.

**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

**Narrator:** Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to JESUS. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father,

**Younger:** 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'

**Narrator:** So he divided his property between his two sons.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said,

**Younger:** 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

**Narrator:** So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him

**Younger:** 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

**Father:** 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'

**Narrator:** And they began to celebrate. Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. The slave replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then the elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father,

**Elder:** '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!'

**Father:** '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 Word of the Lord...

### **Proclamation of the Word**

The Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Forgiving Father is so familiar to some of us that a preacher speaks to it with some peril.

It would be like tampering with your mother's macaroni recipe  
or changing the words to your father's table blessing,  
the one he said every time your family ate a meal.

We love it as it is.

The experience of it is loaded with emotion.

Of course we know that the lost son comes home and that is worth rejoicing over.

And we have been asked to find ourselves in the parable- which brother are we?

the one puffed up on his own virtue or the one filled with vice.

Either way all we have is from the Father, right?

But upon reading the familiar story this week I was struck,

that in some ways we are the crowd.

We are part of it and observing it all.

We did not do a thing; yet, we are invited to a party.

We get to eat our fill of prime rib, dance until dawn, and join in the feast.

While there we learn that the lost son has come home

and the Father not only put a ring on his finger, but a new suit on his back.  
The Father's joy overflows. He is the one who starts the dancing.

At dinner we overhear the neighbors talking about Johnny's big return.  
How the Father ran to meet him, threw his arms around him,  
and kissed him before Johnny ever said a word,  
No "I'm sorry. I've been a terrible son wishing you dead like that. And then I squandered what you gave me."

Nope, the father just ran to hug him so happy to see him.  
Someone said the Father missed Johnny so much,  
he would sit on the porch and watch the driveway every night to see if he was coming.

But there is one person whose absence at the party is very noticeable.  
As the feasting and dancing goes on into the night, the eldest brother James is nowhere to be found.  
No one has seen James all night.

But that seemed oddly normal- James being unseen.  
While the father had been looking down the road for months for Johnny,  
James felt like his father did not see him at all.  
His father had not noticed how hard he worked, dutifully serving the family.  
His father did not seem to notice how everything ran smoothly around the farm.

That was not all by accident.  
He had made it happen while his no good brother took half of the family's money and threw it away.  
His father did not even send word to him about the party while he worked until sundown.  
Yes, he may have stayed out of sight, kept his nose down,  
but his father had never even invited his buddies over for a BBQ.  
The Father had been looking for the lost son's return, but the remaining son felt invisible, part of the landscape- unnoticed and underappreciated.

Jesus is telling us parables about repentance. And last week he warned,  
"Repent or perish. " We talked about the fact that Jesus is really saying, "We are all going to die, so hurry up, repent so that you can live the life God intends for you."  
Repent really means to make a turn around. That's not a course correction or a tweak.  
Repent means making a 180.  
So if we are going in one direction, repentance means putting on the brakes,  
squealing the tires,  
turning around and going in the other direction.

Then which one do you think really repented in this parable?  
Was it the lost son, the elder son ...or was it the father?

Of course, the lost son, at least, turned around and came home to the Father.  
Now, we are not sure of the sincerity of his apology,  
and neither are we sure that he changed his self-centered, irresponsible ways.  
But he does return home.  
Maybe the lavish feast thrown in his honor changes his heart,  
makes him less selfish and appreciative of all his dad has done for him.  
We do not know.

And Jesus never tells us what happens with the elder brother James.  
He may never join in the feast because he is nursing his hurt.  
For all we know he stays outside to wallow in his anger...  
missing out on the feast and the joy set before him.  
We are not sure if any of them really changes...

But we know that the one who has joy is the father!  
We can see it oozing out of his pores, the smile has not left his face all night.

For all the somberness of LENT (so beautifully expressed by our children's choir),  
it is a season of joy for God in that same way.  
Every sin confessed, every ash-smudged forehead,  
each sung, "Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy" is music to God's ears.  
To God it sounds like a child returned home.  
God's heart is filled with joy.  
God's heart overflows with steadfast love and kindness,  
even though makes God look a little foolish- running out like that.  
No respectable person would do so.  
But when the lost child comes home, God celebrates.

"Lenten Joy" sounds like an oxymoron like "jumbo shrimp" or "elementary algebra."  
Lenten joy- on the journey towards the Cross, it does sound strange.  
Jesus is crucified by our rejection of God's lavish embrace for lost sons.  
But the writer of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus endured the cross and  
suffered not to show his strength or to satisfy the will of his vindictive father.  
Hebrews reads,

“For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. “ (Hebrews 12:2b) Jesus endured the cross that we might see the depth and breadth of that wondrous love- a love that will not let us go.

That love offered to the child lost in his own vice  
and to the child smugly satisfied in her hard work and virtue.  
Both children at home in the love of God.  
Both children count.

In her telling of these parables of lost sheep, coins, and children being found, Amy Jill-Levine, writes the ending in a fresh way.

As a Jewish, New Testament scholar, (now that sounds like an oxymoron)  
she helps us see how Jesus' hearers might have heard this parable.

In Jewish tradition the Shepherd, the woman, and the Father were not necessarily seen as God-figures, but as persons.

So consider the father and elder son that way.

When the elder son comes outside the party, the father listens to his complaint.

He stands and hears his anger.

He did not realize his son felt this way.

He had been sick with worry over the younger boy.

Then the father turns to him in the same way with much tenderness, saying

"Child, I always had you with me and all I have is yours."

Listen to this part of the story *Who Counts?*<sup>1</sup>

The father thought, "I have two sons- one, two. I paid attention to my younger son, but I discounted my older son. I didn't realize that he felt lost."

The father took his older son's hands in his own. "Please come and join the party. I love you. All I have is yours. Come and be with me and with your brother."

"I have TWO sons." He counted,- "one"- and he pointed to the house where his younger son was celebrating. He counted- "two"- and he put his arms around his older son.

"Without you." He said, "Something is missing. With you, our family is complete."

"With you, our family is complete."

If Jesus is teaching about repentance, in some ways maybe the father repents too.

He sees his elder son, with that same compassion, and reaches out to him,

so that they may be restored to one another.

I know as a mother, I am happiest when our family is all together under the same roof, together at peace and reconciled to one another.

And also as a mother, I know that no two children are alike.

But I love each child with all my heart.

There may be more joy in heaven over a sinner who repents, than over 99 respectable people who do not need to repent.

But all of them count to God.

Both kids are invited to the party- to be restored and made whole.

And we got to come to the feast, for no other reason than to celebrate that good news!

All are invited to the feast to experience Lenten joy.

So what is it that you and I need to repent of in order to feast on the fullness of restored relationships?

During Lent we actually talk a lot about fasting from things like food or anger, so that we can feast on the blessing of our relationships with God and each other.

Our common crucial calling is to come and be reconciled-

and to set a feast so others may know the good news of salvation- as we are doing for our college ministry this season with our Crucial Calling Campaign.

We may come just as we are, but know that God's grace will not leave us that way.

So what if we fast in order to feast?

We may need to fast from hurtful words and say kind words<sup>ii</sup>

sadness in order to be filled with gratitude

our anger and be filled with patience

pessimism and be filled with hope

worries and have trust in God

words so we can be silent and listen

complaining so we can contemplate the gift of simplicity

Selfishness and turn to be compassionate

old grudges and be reconciled

bitterness and be filled with joy

We fast in order to feast on the goodness of God's grace.

Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him- so that all God's children might be reconciled to God and to one another.

That, my friends, is good news!

News as comforting as your mother's homemade macaroni

and as beautiful as the simplicity of your father asking the blessing around the family table.

May Lenten joy fill our hearts- because there is plenty, plenty enough to go around.

May it be so.

---

<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, Sandy Sasso, *Who Counts? 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017.)

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Pope Francis, Lent address on fasting for lent as quoted by many sources like this, <https://www.livingcompass.org/wwow/new-kind-fast>, original unavailable on Vatican website.