

A Welcome Back Party!
September 15, 2013
Luke 15: 1-32

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

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

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, "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."

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

But the father said to his slaves, "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!"

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. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "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!"

Then the father said to him, "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.' "

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words attributed to Jesus. Amen.

Let us pray . . . In the midst of our busy lives, help us to slow down enough to see the reasons for celebration that surround us. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Every church has an amazing history. Many, perhaps nearly all of us, became a part of this community of faith after participating in multiple other churches.

The first church I served in a ministerial capacity holds a special place in my heart. I accepted the call to that congregation a few months before graduating from seminary. The history of that community of faith extends back far beyond my tenure.

When they held their first service of worship their city was less than ten years old and had under a thousand residents. Today that same congregation is 150 years old, and the city has grown to well over a million residents. This church is the oldest continually meeting Protestant congregation in the city of Dallas, Texas.

Next month that congregation is throwing a huge party! They are inviting former members and ministers to travel from near and far to return home to a congregation that enriched them at some point on their journey of faith. While I won't be able to attend, I am sure it will be an unforgettable welcome back party!

Who doesn't enjoy a good party?

All across the country today people are celebrating something that didn't exist when I was growing up, and an occasion that I suspect many of you have never heard of. Did you know that today is Back to Church Sunday?

This recently created annual event seeks to build on something that has happened for as long as there has been church: people returning to church after time away.

Every Sunday of every year people voluntarily choose to return to worship after missing multiple weeks, months or even years. Only one Sunday a year, however, are people strongly encouraged to consider returning alongside others who have also been away.

Participating congregations use Back to Church Sunday to achieve a variety of strategic objectives. Some use it as an outreach or evangelistic tool, reaching out to their local communities. Others use it as a way to alert young families that time has come to end their summer vacations from the faith and return for a new year of church school, youth groups and family ministry programs.

Whether for these or other reasons, participating congregations have a shared emphasis on celebration. Today over 20,000 congregations all across the theological spectrum will be holding welcome back to church parties.¹

What is the deal with all of these welcome back parties? Why is a church in Dallas so happy to welcome and celebrate those who have been away for years, when there are many who attend nearly every Sunday?

Why do so many congregations who participate in Back to Church Sunday spend incredible amounts of energy and funds to throw lavish parties celebrating the return of people who took the summer off? Why not allocate those resources to throw a thank you party for those who never left?

The answer is found in this morning's Scripture reading. Even if this is the first Sunday you have ever attended a Christian worship service, it is unlikely this is the first time you have heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son. For many of us it is a story we know so well that it is difficult to even imagine the impact it would have on us if we were hearing it for the first time this morning. While I do not presume that I can restore a sense of naivety, I invite you to reconsider the story by seeing it from multiple perspectives.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third in a series of three parables about that which is lost. First came the lost sheep - something deeply troubling to the one responsible for their care. Next came the lost coin. While the coin itself wasn't worth much, it was significant to its owner. Finally, the series of three parables concludes with a story about the troubling decisions of the younger son - emphasizing how lost he became as the result of his actions.

Perhaps then we should refer to these as the Parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son. But, whether you prefer to think of this story as the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Lost Son, it is important to recognize that it is actually a story about not one but two sons losing their way. Think about the older brother's response to the return of his younger brother. Aren't those the actions of a lost man?

¹ Back to Church Sunday < <http://backtochurch.com/> >

Think about the many ways in which good people find their way into living like the younger brother and also like the older brother. Think about your own life experiences. If we are honest with ourselves we will find that at some point in life all of us have been in one or both roles.

While we need to see the shortcomings of both sons, if we stop there we miss what may well be the main point of the parable.

Parables were Jesus' favorite teaching tool. Depending on how you count, the Gospels contain between 30 and 40 of his parables. Put differently, parables account for more than a third of Jesus' recorded teaching. Without going into great detail about what parables really are, it is important to recognize two common characteristics.

First, parables focus on what our translation calls the kingdom of God. This focus on the kingdom of God is obvious in the parables that begin "the kingdom of God is like," but is also present in others where no such direct remark is made. Today people refer to it as the kingdom, the reign, the realm, the kindom, and even the empire of God.

Charles McCullough, a UCC minister and artist, defines parables as "metaphors or similes, plus narratives, usually with a surprise turn that points *towards* God's Empire and *away* from all other empires"²

A second common characteristic of parables is the significance of their endings. Numerous scholars are quick to remind us that when it comes to hearing the real meaning of parables we must focus on what comes at the end; we need to pay special attention to the content that follows the surprise turn.

This leads me to even more titles some use for this parable. After we navigate beyond the surprise turn, the father plays a central role.

In reality, the father had been preparing for this role for some time. As a result, some label this the Parable of the Waiting Father. The father has always wanted the best for both of his sons. He has waited lovingly and patiently until the youngest is ready to accept what he has always been willing to offer.

² Charles McCullough. *The Art of Parables: Reinterpreting the Teaching Stories of Jesus in Word & Sculpture* (Copper House, 2008), 25.

Yet others think of this as the Parable of the Running Father. When the original hearers of Jesus' story heard it, they would have been shocked by what transpired as the younger son neared home.

Stepping back in time to the world as it was then reveals something those of us living in the 21st century would likely miss. When a Jewish son lost his inheritance then sought to return home, he could expect to be greeted by total rejection.

The community would perform a ceremony in which they would break a large pot in front of him and yell, "You are now cut off from your people!" From that point forward his family and the whole community would reject him forever.³

The father runs to meet his son in part to get to his son before everyone else. To take this bold action, the father must run. Running, however, was something grown men simply did not do in this culture. Running meant hitching up his tunic and revealing his bare legs - an act that was thought of as humiliating and shameful.⁴

Even so, the running father lifts his garment and dashes toward his son who once was lost but now is returning home.

I don't know about you, but I think it's time we all started partying.

I can't think of any more appropriate response to a loving, waiting, welcoming, and even running God. Amen.

³ Matt Williams. "The Prodigal Son's Father Shouldn't Have Run!"

<<http://magazine.biola.edu/article/10-summer/the-prodigal-sons-father-shouldnt-have-run/>.

⁴ Ibid.