

Advent Lutheran Church  
Love Wastefully  
March 23, 2025  
Luke 15:1-32

Biblical literacy has been declining throughout my lifetime. Despite this ongoing decline some Bible stories are widely known – in and beyond the church.

When I last stood before you to preach the text was the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Today's reading includes the Parable of the Prodigal Son. These two might just top the list – at least for American's knowledge of Jesus' parables.

While many of Jesus' parables are found in multiple Gospels, these two are found only in Luke's Gospel. These and all of Jesus parables are easy to follow stories that give us insight in how to live according to the Way of Jesus. And, they tend to include a twist and it is only after that twist we receive the so what – the universally applicable wisdom that we are invited to embody.

You'll remember in the Parable of the Good Samaritan the action came not with the first character or the second, but the third. The third guy was last in every way. And, yet, God used him to render aid and to this day we call folks who step in to help Good Samaritans.

Before I say anything about the Parable of the Prodigal Son, I'd like to thank our Lutheran friends – the ones who created the Narrative Lectionary that has provided our weekly readings as we've journeyed through Luke this year. Today, rather than one well known story, they invite us to hear what God might be saying through three.

Luke places them in their current order for a reason. Together, these are parables about lost things being found and they are also about rejoicing.

We begin with the Parable of the Lost Sheep. While not as widely recognized, it is a classic children's Sunday School story. And, it

is the only one of today's three that is told elsewhere. You'll also find it in Matthew's Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

During this time in human history, shepherding was hard and dirty work. Society viewed shepherds as less than. And, yet, there were good people who did this work faithfully and well. In this parable we encounter one.

Imagine a shepherd responsible for 100 sheep who suddenly realizes he is only caring for 99. Rather than writing off the loss as the cost of doing business, he devotes his full energy to finding the one missing sheep. And, then, rather than feeling relief and returning to work as normal, he throws a party.

The shepherd rejoices when he finds his lost sheep and he does so in an over-the-top manner that includes gathering his family and his neighbors. He wants the whole world to rejoice with him.

Luke follows this story with one about a woman. This is consistent with Luke's pattern. Throughout his Gospel he lifts up women and their roles. Here he pairs the male shepherd with a female householder.

She loses a coin. While there is some debate about the value of her lost object, most scholarship suggests it was worth a day's wages. To put this in our terms, imagine a single woman who has had a tough life but has lived frugally and has saved up \$1,000. It is all she has to her name. And, one day, when she checks under her mattress, one of her \$100 bills is missing.

Siblings in Christ, pay attention to the pattern. The money was lost. The money is found. And, the woman rejoices. And, her joy goes far behind what is expected.

She gets everyone in her circle of friends together to tell them the good news. Some commentators even suggest she may have spent more on that party than she recovered.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:12-14

We have a pair of parables. A man and a woman. Each loses something precious. Each then devotes themselves to searching with single-minded focus. Each ultimately finds what was lost. And, each of their stories ends with joy – a joy that they cannot contain and are compelled to share.

And now, with these two parables as our context, I invite you to hear anew the parable you think you already know – the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

To think of this story like we've done with the first two, we step into the father's shoes. And, this is where the twist begins.

- The shepherd lost 1/100 of his livelihood.
- The woman lost 1/10 of her net worth.
- The Father lost 1 of his 2 sons.

While the lostness is equally complete, the stakes are much, much higher. And, as a result, we get a longer story with more details about the son, including his choice to leave, his life while lost, and his decision to return.

We also learn more about the father. We meet a loving man who was hurt in ways only those who have experienced a similar loss can truly begin to understand. This is a man who never gives up on his son. I picture him sitting outside on his porch day after day hoping, praying, longing to be reunited.

Finally, the story concludes with the one who was lost returning, becoming found again, becoming family again. With the father racing to meet his prodigal son, to embrace him, and to welcome him in the most loving yet over the top way possible.

In the last line of this long parable the father tells all who will listen – including those of us gathered here – that he had to celebrate. Listen up people of God, the Father had to celebrate.

Three parables all teach us the same truth. Rather than centering lostness and foundness, they center love.

- Wasteful love.

- Extravagant love.
- Lavish love.

Friends, I know many people who work demanding blue-collar jobs. In these roles they are asked to keep track of far more than any person really can. Not one of them has loved his inventory so much that when he temporarily lost or misplaced an item then found it again, he called me up along with all of his other friends to celebrate. For many these difficult jobs are means to an end – a necessary economic reality that puts food on the table. This is the rational way to think about their work and what happens when things get lost at work then found again.

And, I know far too many people who have limited savings. Those who are working are always anxious there will be more month than money. Those who are retired are worried that there will be more years left to live than they can possibly afford. When these frugal folks suddenly have less money only to realize their bank balances never changed, they don't celebrate. They simply offer a deep sigh of relief and persist. We all know this is the normal way, the logical way, the way real people respond when things get lost at home then found again.

And then there is family. The bonds between a parent and a child are deeper than any of this. They defy logic. They don't have to make economic sense. At their best, they offer glimpses of true unconditional love.

One of the giants of faith I learned much from for many years, Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong, often called upon people to live fully and love wastefully. I was always intrigued by that invitation. This morning, I think I finally understand.

To love wastefully is to love disproportionately. To love wholeheartedly. To love as God loves.

- This kind of love isn't expected.
- This kind of love isn't rational.
- This kind of love isn't conditional.

This kind of love is always countercultural.

Siblings in Christ, we are invited to emulate Jesus by loving wastefully, loving irrationally.

Did you catch the context of today's reading? Jesus was gathering with those society had labeled less than. He was with the tax collectors and a wide range of ordinary sinners. And the religious leaders were not happy. In fact, they called his attention to this reality.

In response Jesus told three parables that are really three versions of the same story. They are three reminders that that the Way of Jesus is the way of love.

May we have ears to hear and the courage to respond in faith by living fully and loving wastefully to the glory of God.

Amen.