

The Favored One  
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**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

1 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable:

<sup>11</sup> ‘There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>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! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>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.” ’

Alyce M. McKenzie, in her book on parables<sup>1</sup> which we have been using each Wednesday at Bible Study, explains that the parables serve to teach us three things: what the reign of God is like, what the ruler, God, is like, and how we are called to respond. Yet, in the parable we read today, we are so prone to focusing on the brothers and their behavior, often to the exclusion of the behavior of the father. McKenzie’s formula reminds us that it’s not all about us. The parables are two parts God, one part us.

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<sup>1</sup> McKenzie, Alyce M. *The Parables for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007)

It's okay if we spend time recognizing that we shouldn't begrudge others of God's forgiveness of them, for we are just as forgiven. And it's okay if we acknowledge the ways in which we have taken our gifts from God for granted, turned our backs on God, and set off, only to come back to God when our troubles were so great that we realized we really did need God after all. With those in mind, we come to a greater appreciation of God's response to us.

I've said before that the gospel was scandalous, that the stories which we blithely accept today once shook the world in which they were told. Today's parable is no exception, and not only because of the treatment of the younger brother. As Professor Leslie J. Hoppe explains, "Jesus' audience would have been shocked as much by the presumed sale of the land as they would have been by the son's squandering of the proceeds from the sale. It was not just a question of a land-based economy, which led Jewish families to hold on to the ancestral lands. It was also a question of religious belief, since Jews considered their ancestral holdings to be God's gift to their families... Usually a father who had been so shamed by the actions of his son would have disowned that son... [instead] as soon as he caught sight of his son, he ran out to meet him – something a Palestinian Jewish patriarch would never have done."<sup>2</sup> Hoppe continues, "The banquet served to ease the younger son back into the good graces of the neighbors."<sup>3</sup>

And as for the treatment of the older brother, Hoppe writes, "The father abandoned his guests, which was a breach of etiquette, in order to persuade his older son to rejoice at his brother's return... The father chose to absorb the shame heaped on him by the elder brother, just as he did for the younger brother. He willingly adopted the stance of pleading with his elder son – a major humiliation for a father from the patriarchal culture of early Judaism."<sup>4</sup> Scandalous, indeed! And so we return to McKenzie's formula – what does this parable tell us about what the reign of God is like, and what God is like as its ruler? In a way that reminds us that it's not about us *and* describes God, scholar Rodney Clapp narrates a reply for God to the older brother, saying, "This is not your younger brother's party so much as it is *my* party, the party I throw for many. I am on the lookout for all my loved ones, near or far. I am working for them and ready to celebrate with them before they even think of responding to me or giving anything back."<sup>5</sup>

This parable in Luke comes on the heels of the parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin. From all of them, we learn that God's sense of right and wrong is not ours, and that God's priorities are not ours. No shepherd in his right mind would risk the safety of ninety-nine sheep just to find one. No

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 119, 121.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 118, 120.

person would turn the house upside-down for a penny. And no father would stoop to meet the children who had disgraced him, much less run to them. But Jesus says the kingdom of God is like this – God reaches out for the one with little value in our world, God reaches out for the one who rejects God.

What is the reign of God like? Those who recognize the distance between themselves and God, who turn, or re-turn, to God are met with God’s gladness, God’s joy over reunion. Those who do not even see the distance between themselves and God are given assurances that God has not gone away nor taken God’s gifts away. The reign of God celebrates upon each re-turning to God.

What is God like as a ruler? As the apostle Paul puts it to the church in Corinth, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.”<sup>6</sup> As a ruler, God does nothing like *we* would do, for everything God does is driven by the desire for reconciliation, and colored by mercy as we have never shown it to others. God is always looking for us, looking for us before we even think to look for God. God is lavish with joy when we re-turn. God is lavish with grace when we have yet to realize we need to re-turn.

This Lent, through the scriptures, I’ve been encouraging you to come closer to God. I could suggest you reflect, like the younger son, on the gifts from God which you may have squandered or taken for granted but, I think, this story demands we look beyond ourselves. Instead, this story demands that we stop looking at ourselves, and for ourselves, in scripture and we begin looking for God. Look for the scandalous God. Look for the extravagant God. Look for the merciful God. Look for the reconciling God. Look for the foolish God.

If you haven’t yet picked up a Lenten devotional book, there are still copies on the back table. Use those readings for the day, or choose your own. Either way, as this Lenten season continues, look for God, and not yourself, in the Bible. It’s important that we can find our own stories in the stories of the Bible, and we do that most of the time. Let this Lent be a time when we seek **God’s** story, for when we are attuned to this generous God, we see the coming of God’s Son with new eyes, with greater appreciation. And then we see God’s sacrifice through God’s Son with new eyes, with greater appreciation. In seeking God, may you be flooded with gratitude for the God who made you and the God who seeks you. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Watch for us, O Lord, for we can be slow to re-turn, and slow to see how far away we are. We give thanks for your open arms awaiting us. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25