

The Triumph of Grace in the Prodigal Son

A Study of Luke 15

By Clinton Stockwell

Wellington Avenue UCC

March 18, 2007

This morning's lesson is taken from the 15th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke. You could say that the three stories in this passage represent "the gospel within the gospel." Its theme is the triumph of the grace of God. Several years ago, when I was a seminary student, I bumped into the magisterial work of protestant theologian, Karl Barth. In fact, there is a major work on Barth's thought, called the Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth (By G C Berkouwer). After reading and studying the three stories in Luke 15, I think I now more fully understand what Barth was thinking.

Luke's gospel is known to be the first of a two -volume history of the early church, written purportedly by Luke the Physician and traveler with Paul. It is actually a theological interpretation of the history of Jesus' ministry and the growth of the early church. Marcus Borg, in his book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, states that Luke's Jesus is "the spirit-anointed social prophet whose activity is directed toward the poor and oppressed." Jesus' declaration of his public ministry in Luke 4:13 and ff.: "The Spirit of the lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor and downtrodden, to set the oppressed free" sets the stage for the rest of Luke's writing. Luke seeks to put the emergence of early Christianity in its historical context as he addresses the conflict between rich and poor, and between religious insiders and religious outsiders more explicitly than any other evangelist.

Luke 15 begins by restating the situation that Jesus was facing, namely his conflict with the official religious authorities. Please be aware that I accept the idea that Luke's scribes and Pharisees are emblematic of *aspects* of first century Judaism, but I do not believe that Luke's scribes and Pharisees represent the sum total experience of first century Judaism. After all, most of the characters mentioned in Luke were for the most part first century Jews. The issue is more about power and grounds for inclusion- and particularly the problem of power as noted in issues of social class, race, nationality, and religious practice—flashpoints for many of the conflicts noted. The problem, from the standpoint of Luke's scribes and Pharisees, was that Jesus was hanging out with the wrong crowd! It seemed to the religious establishment of the time that Jesus was consorting with certain labeled people - namely the "tax collectors or publicans, and sinners," those who seemed to be constantly approaching and befriending Jesus. Hence, from the standpoint of the religious political establishment, rather than hanging out with the approved group, Jesus was in league with those considered "suspect." The "tax collectors" or Publicans, for example, were those who assessed taxes on the people for the Empire and they were those who collected such taxes to support the occupation. From the standpoint of resident Jews in biblical times, these publicans were guilty also of extortion and unjust assessments, and were also suspected of spying for the empire.

One can readily see how this would prove a problem for those who didn't want to be taxed—particularly since the money went to support an oppressive military force. At the same time, that Jesus related to those who were like Nicodemus in another story, relates Jesus' capacity

for inclusion of the “lost.” The “sinners” were those who did not practice ritual purity. They were labeled as “sinners” because they did not worship on the Sabbath, did not eat ritually clean food, and did not participate in approved rituals of public cleansing. These so-called sinners were also likely to be non-Jews, and they likely represented the poorer, uneducated “crowd” and who were also considered inferior and of another race or nationality. They were clearly outside the pale, were “Gentiles” and were those for whom any self-respecting orthodox person of biblical times would avoid. The orthodox would ritually cleanse themselves, even if they came into incidental contact with such people. And here it is, Jesus is eating with them in common social gatherings. Hence, the “tax collectors and the sinners” represented that group of people who were utterly despised, and the religious establishment were using their political skill to hang a negative label on Jesus. Lets call it guilt by association. We know how this works today, right?

The “Pharisees” of course, represented the religiously pure, the orthodox, and were the fundamentally sound “true believers” of ancient Judaism. The “Scribes” were the educated doctors of the law, who were the properly credentialed, professional scholars. They were the authorities in matters of interpretation and religious observance. The scribes were the official interpreters of the torah, and their traditions governed behavior, including defining who to associate with. The problem for the scribes and the Pharisees is that Jesus did not seek out the opinion of the recognized religious authority. Rather, it seemed to them that Jesus was acting *of his own authority* (this is the first problem). Secondly, Jesus made things worse in that he was also associating with the unwashed *ochlos* (the crowds and the multitudes), or the *am ha aretz*, “the people of the land” (a peasant label), those considered outside the official circles of orthodoxy.

Luke 15’s three parables is directed specifically to Jesus’ religious accusers. In the three stories, Jesus in effect turns the table on the Pharisees as to who is really righteous before the Creator.

The Lost Sheep

The first story is the story of the lost sheep. The shepherd in this passage is a good shepherd, and despite the relative safety of the 99, he is ultimately concerned for the one sheep that is lost. Each of the three stories in Luke 15 is about something Lost-historically a rather neutral term. “Lostness” suggests that something is out of place, or that someone is missing, but was not originally a metaphor of moral condemnation or judgment. There is also nothing in the first two stories that suggests that lostness is the result of a wrong moral choice. Lostness is morally neutral in the first two stories.

Lostness in these stories is also less about the object, and is really more about the subject, the one who seeks out to find that which is lost. In the first story, the lost sheep has strayed from the flock. As a result, the shepherd urgently leaves the 99 “in the wilderness” to search for the lost sheep before danger arrives. The phrase, ³in the wilderness² suggests that the shepherd did not take the time to secure the 99, but rather than spend the time on the saved, the shepherd gave urgent attention to finding that which was lost. The parable of the lost sheep is about the unconditioned and frantic search by the good shepherd for the lost sheep. The lost sheep is not blamed or suspected for being lost. Rather the shepherd simply rejoices that one who was lost

is now found. Some interpreters point out that the lost sheep may have been the weakest of the flock, or may have been sick and not able to keep up with the flock's movements.

This is a gentle rebuke to the distinctions of Jesus' accusers- who would likely blame the sheep for being lost, or perhaps would not expend the effort to find the sheep. Rather, the Pharisees might rationalize that the sheep not only left the fold of its own initiative, but must not have been of the fold anyway, so why be concerned. In this story, the shepherd, like Jesus, is willing to risk all for the sake of the one that is lost.

The Lost Coin

In the second story, the parable of the lost coin, Luke matches the male lead character of the lost sheep story, with a female one. Scholars are divided in their opinion of whether or not the woman in this story represents the Creator, or whether she represents the church or congregation. If the woman represents God the creator, like the shepherd of the former story, and like the good father of the prodigal story, it would mean that at least one story among the parables identifies God as a woman.

Luke's poor woman is likely a poor young woman on the verge of being married. The woman has lost a coin, the Greek says drachma, which is the equivalent of a poor person's wage for a day's labor. So, her total of ten drachmas or ten coins represents the sum total of her wealth, ten days wages, and therefore the sum total of her dowry for an impending marriage. Given the nature of her dowry, it is likely that she is betrothed to someone who shares her lowly social status.

Of the significance of this parable, Joiachim Jeremias (The Parables of Jesus) writes:

“In the parable of the Lost Drachma, which as far as v. 9 is also to be read as a question, the 10 drachmas will remind everyone who is familiar with Arab Palestine of the woman's head-dress bedecked with coins which is part of her dowry, and may not be laid aside, even in sleep; the custom of wearing gold dinars is also attested by the Tosephta. If the woman's 10 drachmas were on here head-dress, she was indeed a very poor creature....” (134-5).

It may be that she is a servant girl, and that the ten coins were part of a headdress was going to be worn at her wedding, but one of the coins fell and is lost between the bricks. She employs a lamp and a broken broom to find the lost coin, and with great effort and diligence ultimately finds it. As a result, she summons her friends, who may be her friends or bridesmaids for the wedding, to celebrate the fact that she has found the lost coin and now has the requisite sum for her wedding vows. That the young woman is the one who searches for the lost coin is also evidence of servant status. Perhaps her promise of ten drachmas is exactly what she needs to escape poverty and servitude.

While the ten drachmas mean little in the monetary world, they mean everything to the young woman! Her search and ultimate recovery of the lost coin is a metaphor of God's concern, even for the least of these. For, even though the coin is of low value, it has ultimate value to the woman-- even as a lost person has for the Creator. It also suggests that, for the woman, the absence of the lost coin in her headdress would mean that her dowry would be incomplete, for it would be without the full compliment of the ten coins. Hence, the value of the lost coin is greatly appreciated for the woman, but not along monetary lines.

The Pharisees of course would have a different set of values. The woman is servile, and has little to offer in terms of financial or social status. But of course, the woman means something more to the betrothed, even as the lost coin means everything to the woman. Her virtue is evident in that she was able to save the ten coins, despite her poverty and social station. For the young woman, a day's wages may not amount to much to the wealthy, but to her it represented the difference between survival and happiness on the one hand and grinding poverty on the other hand. To Jesus, the accusers value the external. But for the woman, there is a much higher value placed on the coin. To her, its value is symbolic, intrinsic and incalculable. It is the symbol of her love for another—and it is a token of her trust granted in hope of a liberating relationship.

The Lost Son

Now for the third story. While we know the third story as the story of the Prodigal son, in keeping with the first two parables, this story is really about the recovery of the son who was lost. The story of the lost and found son completes the trilogy here of stories of things lost and found. Even so, the word ³prodigal² is a good description of the behavior of the lost son in this passage. In fact, the story of the prodigal son is cited in the 15 volume Oxford English dictionary as the perfect illustration of what the word prodigal means. One can scarcely use the word today without referencing this particular story. A prodigal is one given to extravagant expenditure. It describes one who is wasteful of one's property and means. The prodigal son in Luke's gospel is ³given to vice and folly. He has wastefully and lavishly disposed of his estate. While the prodigal son describes the actions of a "lost son" in Luke, it might also be an appropriate description of material and wasteful culture, and also the prodigal wastefulness of the resources that our administration expends for war and global hegemony—but I will leave that theme for others to explore.

In this story, the younger son asks for and receives his inheritance at an early age. How often this happens! Recently a furniture company in Galena and in Dubuque closed its doors, as a family member wanted his or her share of the family fortune now.

One can imagine easily what must have happened with the younger son. An argument occurred, and the younger son demanded his share of the inheritance now, which was reluctantly granted by the father. To gain one's inheritance in antiquity before the father dies was virtually unheard of. It was like saying, ³Father, I wish you were dead,² though in fact it was the son who was presumed to be dead after having left early with his own inheritance. You know the rest of the story---the younger son spends his inheritance in a distant country, squandering his property in "riotous living" (sort of like what happens in Wrigleyville after a Cubs game, or in a local Casino for someone every night). In Deut. 21:17, the elder son would usually get 2/3 of the estate at the time of the father's death, and the youngest son would get one third. But it rarely happens that someone would get his inheritance before the death of the father.

Even so, the younger son's inexperience leads to ruin. Not only does he squander his inheritance, but he soon finds himself in the middle of an economic depression caused by a famine. Insult is added to injury, and the younger son is forced to find employment as a hired laborer to a swineherd. In antiquity, and even in our time as with the AIDS epidemic, disaster is interpreted by some as evidence of divine judgment. Of course, to the orthodox—to

work with pigs or to feed on the products of the swine was taboo and ritually unclean. To the orthodox, the younger son is not only ³dead² but now has become like a Gentile. If the elder son believed as the Pharisees, he would surely find his younger brother's behavior reprehensible.

This is of course rock bottom for the young man, who in his condition of destitution and hunger, comes to the realization that his father's hired hands are treated much better than he. Whether via repentance or realization of the obvious, the son decides to return home. He has rehearsed his speech of sincere repentance, but his father, who has set up a vigil, recognizes the son from a great distance, and joyfully runs to welcome him back. The son is forgiven already, and is welcomed back without retribution or punishment. He is restored before he has a chance to apologize! Like the heavenly parent, the father remained lovingly concerned regarding his son, despite his son's actions. He accepted the son's return without question or reprimand, whether or not his son uttered a verbal penance. The father immediately restored him to favor and to right-standing with the symbolic gifts of the robe, signet ring and new pair of sandals. For the younger son, it was well enough to be home, even as a hired laborer. For the father, what mattered was not the son's past conduct, but that the son was now restored. The restoration of the relationship meant more to him than anything monetarily. As a result a calf is slaughtered and a time of joyous celebration commenced.

The elder son is of course horrified, for he represents the values of the scribes and the Pharisees. The younger son had become like the tax collector and the sinners, how could he be restored? We can understand, on one level, the elder son's reaction in anger to the younger son's return. After all, the elder son protests that it is he who has been loyal, obedient, and faithful to the will of the father in all things. One might say that the older son was angry and jealous of the younger son, with good reason. However, the elder son is only righteous in a superficial sense. As we look more closely, we see that both sons have abused the father, but the elder son is not cognizant of his own abusive actions. The elder son represents the worldview of the Pharisees, with its emphasis on living up to the law, and maintaining official and ritual purity. But, the father has a different theology. For the father, what matters is that the lost son has now come home, that a broken relationship has been restored. Rather than the narrow fundamentalism and narrow exclusion of the Pharisees, the father in this story has a more inclusive theology that is motivated by grace, forgiveness and compassion for the lost. The father does not share the elder son's legalism or self-righteousness evidenced by material prosperity. The father has a different theology and pattern of ethical behavior.

If the younger son was prodigal, he nonetheless returned to the father in faith. If the elder son was righteous, his righteousness, like all of our righteousness, as stated in the Letter to the Romans, is as filthy rags- not righteous at all, for righteousness is by faith, not by the works of the law, states the apostle Paul. Like the lost sheep of the first parable, we have all like sheep gone astray and have been lost. Like the Betrayal of the Steppenwolf play, all of us have betrayed one another and the Creator who loves us. The elder brother represents the accusers of Jesus' experience. The younger son represents the down and out, the outcast, the marginal, the Gentile the ³sinners¹ according to Pharisaic wisdom. Yet, these are the very ones that Jesus sought to save. If the elder son valued the law and its strictures, the father represents the character of the Sacred as expressed by an all-embracing love and the grace of God, irrespective of wealth, power, birth or legal observances.

Luke 15 teaches us that Jesus is the friend to the lost to the marginal of society, even to those who have squandered their wealth. Luke teaches that the grace of God is triumphant over all circumstances. I think that the Wellington Avenue Church can appreciate the wealth of these three stories, for in many ways we represent a more forgiving and more gracious attitude toward the stranger, and also towards the estranged. Like the stories of Luke 15, I believe that it is our duty and vocation to identify not with those who are righteous, but to seek those who are "lost" in our society. At Wellington, we accept people regardless of social station. We do not judge people on the basis of their actions or circumstances, but our relationship with people is based on the all-encompassing love of God that makes no distinctions between race, class, gender, nationality or sexual preference. For us, the grace of God is the great leveler and sustainer of all creation.

In the Interpreter's Bible, the writer says the following about the significance of Luke's three parables as "the gospel within the gospel". "The word was made flesh, in seeking love, not without risk or pain! God has come to the "other side of the tracks," and has voluntarily shared the prison house which remorse and defiance have built for themselves, that the prisoners [may be set free.]" Such is Luke's amazing introduction to three stories that may yet save our world! Amen and Thanks for listening.