

# North Kildonan United Church

27<sup>th</sup> March 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

*II Corinthians 5: 16-21*

*Psalms 32*

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

*Gracious God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*"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 begins the parable of the prodigal son, as it is commonly called, although it could also be known as the parable of the lost son. That's because this chapter from Luke's gospel contains three parables about being lost and found.

The first parable is about a lost sheep, the one who has wandered away and is diligently sought after by the shepherd. The 99 other sheep are left alone while the lost one is found, returning on the shoulders of the shepherd. Henry Williams Baker captures so well the depth of emotion of that parable in his paraphrase of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, *The King of Love*:

*"Perverse and foolish oft I strayed; but yet in love he sought me,  
And on his shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me."*

All six verses of that hymn are wonderful poetry, rich in imagery and very lyrical. In a previous pastoral charge I served, I well remember visiting an elderly woman in the hospital. Her illness was quite advanced but she kept her spirits up, as she was a woman of deep faith. As we talked, the subject of hymns came up, and she asked me which my favourite was. It turned out that both of us held *The King of Love* as a favourite. So we began to say it together:

*"The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine for ever."*

We continued to say all six verses by memory, ending with:

*"And so through all the length of days thy goodness faileth never;  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house for ever!"*

Within a week she had passed away, trusting in the Good Shepherd to lead her to God's eternal home.

The second parable tells of a woman who has lost a coin, a single coin perhaps of no great value, yet she turns her house upside down until she finds it. And in finding it, she then calls her friends and neighbours to rejoice with her.

Both of these actions, the shepherd risking the whole flock for one lost sheep, and the woman searching for the lost coin, might be seen as being a bit excessive. But then, these are parables, not lessons in animal husbandry or domestic economics. They are pointing to something deeper, to the joy of the lost being found, to the wanderer coming to their senses and returning, or being returned, to the fold. "Just so, I tell you, there

will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance” is the conclusion of the lost sheep parable.

Brendan Byrne writes this in his commentary entitled The Hospitality of God. *“Heaven, that is, God and the entire heavenly court, rejoices over one sinner who repents more than over 99 who have no need of repentance. Why? Because God is crazy with love over each individual human being and rejoices exuberantly over finding one that had been lost in the death that is sin. Jesus’ celebration of joyful meals with repentant sinners simply enacts on earth that exuberant heavenly joy. At stake then is the image Jesus’ critics have of God.”*

Finally, we have the third parable, the one we heard this morning, of the two sons and the father. This is supremely a parable that speaks of the amazing, passionate, forgiving love God has for each of us. In this parable the father never gives up on his wayward son, never stops scanning the horizon for some indication that his son has come to his senses and is returning home. As Luke puts it so beautifully:

*“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.”*

John Newton echoes the emotion of this passage so well: *“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”* One can only imagine the bewilderment, relief and joy of the prodigal being welcomed home so lovingly.

And what of the other son, the loyal, faithful, never caused anyone any bother son, the one who kept the farm going while his brother lived the high life in the city. This is no happy day for him, and he is scandalized at the excess of the celebration. After all, he never got a fatted calf to help celebrate with his friends, never even got a young goat. He never asked for anything, yet this younger brother, this embarrassment to the family name, asked for everything, including his share of the inheritance, which he wasted away in no time. Now the family are celebrating this guy’s return! Hardly fair, certainly not just. No wonder the older brother is angry.

All the father can say in response to the expressed anger is this:

*“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.”*

If we were in a study group instead of a worship service, what thoughts might come to mind about this parable? What do you think of the younger son who squanders his inheritance and after some truly rough living returns home, seeking forgiveness?

What do you think of the dutiful older son, the faithful one who stayed on the farm and seems to have never had any fun? And what do you make of the father, the one who gave the younger son his inheritance yet never stopped loving and looking for his wayward son?

We began today's gospel reading this way: *"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."*

The gospels tell us that the religious authorities of the day were quick to find fault with Jesus, sure that he was misleading the people and encouraging them to abandon their customs and practices. This Jesus seemed to reject the rules, and he clearly didn't know what company to keep. Respectable people don't associate with sinners, let alone sharing meals with them. Yet Jesus did and he welcomed the opportunity.

Perhaps Jesus had the Pharisees and scribes and others of their ilk in mind when he described the attitude of the older son. People for whom the observance of the law was more important than the realities, the occasional victories, the happy events of ordinary life. People who cannot see the joyous occasion it is when the lost are found, when those who have gone their own way repent and return to the family of God.

This parable is all about extravagance, the extravagant love of God as portrayed in the father who spares no expense to celebrate his love for his son, for the return of his lost son to the family.

Back in my seminary days, one of our professors said that he believed that whenever we profess our belief in God, God's heart is touched. Whenever we say "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth" the heart of God skips a beat, as it were.

Such is the love, the passion God has for creation, for all of us within creation.

In his commentary on this passage Tom Wright offers this, and I believe it's worth hearing.

He begins: "We just had to have a party!"

Then continues: "That's the main point of the story. Jesus had been challenged about the parties he was having, and the company he was keeping at them, and he responded with this spectacular story. Let's go to one of those parties and see what it was all about.

We sneak in at the back and find things already in full flow. A bit of a rough crowd, it seems-the sort of people you'd probably avoid in the street, some of them scruffy, some of them a bit too suspiciously well dressed. (How could they afford clothes like that?). Somebody's obviously been hard at work cooking, because there are delicious smells coming from a back room and people keep emerging from the kitchen with more dishes. And there are flagons of wine and everyone is helping themselves...and in the middle of it all we spot Jesus himself, relaxed and easy, reclining as people did on a

couch beside the table, chatting to the man beside him, occasionally flashing a smile at the serving-girls bringing more food, or waving to a newcomer who's heard there's a party and has pushed his way in. Occasionally we hear snatches of what Jesus is saying. Something about the first being last and the last first. The man he's talking to looks surprised; he wants to believe it but isn't yet sure he can.

But at the back of the crowd, where we're standing, there are other voices. *What on earth is he up to now?* Isn't he supposed to be a prophet? Isn't he telling people about God's kingdom? Doesn't that mean being holy, not messing around with the rabble? And if he's teaching people to call God 'Father', doesn't he know that sons are supposed to obey their Father's commandments? He's just a glutton and a drunkard like them-and the Bible warned us about teachers like that!

Eventually Jesus looks up, and glances round the room towards the whisperers. The talking dies down as people wait to see what he's going to say. All right, you want to know why there's a party? You want to know how it is with fathers and sons? And out it comes: a masterpiece, one of the greatest stories ever told, echoing the ancient stories of those other ill-starred brothers, Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and particularly Esau and Jacob. The son who runs away in trouble and comes back to find resentment. But all with a new twist. *Something new is going on, right here, right now, and a party is the only possible response.* 'Resurrection' is happening right under your noses, and you can't see it. 'This my son – this your brother – was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.'

Amen.