

LENT IN PLAIN SIGHT: A NEW PAIR OF SHOES

Luke 15:11-32

March 27, 2022

“And he told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.” Those words are from Matthew’s Gospel, but they summarize the whole preaching and teaching ministry of Jesus. Over and over again, Jesus turns to his followers, addresses the crowds, speaks to his detractors, not in propositional assertions or dogmatic statements, but in these relatable narratives, easily remembered and retold. It is as if there are some truths so profound, some lessons so scandalous, so close to the heart of reality, so discomfiting in their directness, that only a story, only a picture, only an image, an example, can truly describe them.

Let me tell you a story: A sower went out to sow his seeds. Let me tell you a story: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. Let me tell you a story: There was a man who had two sons.

That parable—the one that begins with those words—is actually the third in a series of stories. Jesus tells them after he takes some heat for the kind of company he’s keeping. Sinners. Tax collectors. The outcasts and the ostracized. Not the right crowd for a teacher of the law. And so, under pressure, Jesus tells three short stories. They are parables of the lost, the found, and the finder. A single wayward sheep in a flock of one hundred. A foolish shepherd who recklessly abandons the ninety-nine to find that one. A single, solitary coin in a stack of ten coins. A woman who carelessly turns her entire house inside out in search of that one coin. Without the one, the group would be incomplete. The shepherd had one hundred sheep, not ninety-nine. The woman had ten coins, not nine. Without the one, the group is incomplete.

And then, let me tell you a story: There was a man who had two sons. Another story of the lost, the found, and the finder. This time, the younger son gets lost all on his own. The text is slightly vague on this point but gives us enough to deliver the news. It’s dissolute living. He is separated from his family. He is all on his own. At first, he is lost. And then, he is hungry. He is lonely. He is nearly destitute, eyeing the pig troughs with envy. He had no one, and no one gave him anything.

The turning point—well, the first turning point—in the story comes in a curious phrase that is frustratingly ambiguous, at least to this preacher. Jesus says, “He came to himself.” Now, I get it. The beauty and the challenge of parables are found precisely in that ambiguity. Whereas doctrinal declarations can cut out conversation, these stories invite us in to ponder their meaning. Is the younger son sorry? Does he repent? When he *came to himself* was it a moment of personal transformation or simply the hatching of a brilliantly manipulative plan? “Dad will go for this one.”

We can debate his sincerity, thereby revealing our level of cynicism, but here’s the thing. In this story, *it doesn’t even matter*. That speech he has planned, practiced, prepared? He doesn’t even need it. His father needs nothing except the sight of his son returning. He sees him from a distance. He sprints out to meet him. Consider that image for just a moment. This old man running like a child through the field to embrace the son he thought he would never see again. To embrace him. To kiss him. The younger son clears his throat. He is prepared to begin his statement, but he can’t even get the words out because his father is shouting instructions. *Bring him*

a robe, a ring for his finger! Get my son a new pair of shoes. We're having steak tonight. It's time to celebrate.

Amen. And the parable might have ended right there. If so, it would be just like the first two. The shepherd who recklessly goes after one lost sheep. The woman who carelessly tears the house apart for a single coin. After all, what has been lost is now found. It's time to celebrate. It's a neat and tidy conclusion to the trilogy, and I like that ending.

You see, I have two sons. My love for each has an intensity that can sometimes overwhelm me. I can fully relate to that running father, the preemptive grace that love affords, the forgiveness that comes so quickly when your beloved child is the one who has done wrong. I love that perspective on this story. I love the picture of a God who would literally do anything it takes to close the gap between us. This is no "meet in the middle" relationship. Grace comes all the way to where we are.

Each summer, I take a week all by myself to plan and prepare the worship schedule for the program year. Back in July, I knew that I wanted to use the theme *Lent in Plain Sight* from my friend Jill Duffield's book, so I spent some time that week reading her reflections on different texts and objects. Week four of Lent—this week—was focused on *shoes*. Scripture passages on *shoes* or sandals. Initially, I was drawn to the text of the burning bush—the voice of God commanding Moses to remove the shoes from his feet because the ground on which he stood was saturated with the sacred. The next story is this parable. Shoes? I read the story carefully, and only then did I remember that particular detail. The father demanding a new pair of shoes for his wayward son. I was captivated by that simple image. Grace in a new pair of shoes.

And then, it hit me. I have never preached this parable. I've been preaching regularly for two decades now. In that time, I've written seven hundred and seventeen sermons (or something like that). But never a sermon on this most memorable parable. Never a sermon on this beloved and vexing story. Why not?

Well, I have two sons. I love the image of that running father. But that is not the end of *this* story...or mine. I am a father. *And*, I am an older brother. The rest of this story hits a little too close to home.

When I was sixteen years old, I had saved enough money to buy my own car. That amount of money was eight hundred dollars. It was earned six dollars per basketball game running the scoreboard at the Pleasant Garden Gym, and it was the price tag for a 1990 Ford Probe. The year was 1998. You laugh, but it had the headlights that raised. I had never been prouder in my life. I bought a can of turtle wax and cleaned that car inside and out for weeks before I finally passed my driving test. And then, the fateful day. I was going to drive to our youth group's monthly open gym night, and I had it all planned out. I would get there a little early. I would park my car right in front of the gym entrance. And then I would casually stand next to my shiny car in case anyone happened to pass by and want to see it or hear more about it. That night, I would also be driving my younger brother. He was nine years old and already a basketball star who fit right in with the older kids. A few hours before the event was to take place, Josh and I were playing in the driveway. The game was: See if Josh can jump in the passenger seat while Chris backs the car down the driveway. Yes, yes, you see where this is going. But I did not. The passenger door was wide open. The driver was not paying adequate attention. A cherry tree just off the driveway. Josh hops in. The door stays open. Then, the door bends back as it meets the tree, the grinding sound of metal on metal loud enough for my father to hear inside. The next few minutes are a bit of a blur, but the dialogue went something like this. *Dad, he should have closed the door!* Son, he's nine years old. *Dad, the game was all his idea!* Son, you are responsible for your car. *Dad, it's not fair!* And that's how, an hour later, I'm sitting in my room, listening as Dad and Josh pull out of the driveway on their way to open gym night. I can hear their excitement as they head out the door.

I've never preached this parable. If only it ended with the simple joy of celebration. What was lost now is found. Cue the credits. That's all we need.

But this man had *two* sons, and we haven't heard from the older one. Not yet. Well, I know why. He has been dutifully working in the field, just as he was supposed to do. He's been keeping the score at the Pleasant Garden Gym, saving his money, earning his keep. He's helping the family. In fact, that's what he's doing when he hears the sounds of celebration. *What is going on out there?* It's your brother. He's back. Your father has pulled out all the stops. The fatted calf.

The older brother knows that calf. He raised that calf. Fed that calf. And he didn't even get invited to the party—the irresponsible, inappropriate, outlandish, uncalled for party.

The encounter between the father and his older son is hard to hear, at least for me. Dad begins to explain, pleading, “I have *two* sons.” But it's finally too much for the son to take. “*Listen,*” he says. “Listen to me. For once in your life, listen to me. Stop taking his side. Stop celebrating his return. Stand there and listen to my story. I have done everything you've asked of me. I have been by your side in good times and in bad. I have been the responsible, respectful, rational one. And *he*, that son of yours, has been... well, he's been the opposite. And it's not fair.” The older son is angry. And do you know what else? He is right. He's right. From where I stand, the older son is indisputably and inarguably right. What has happened is unjust and inequitable, and he is absolutely right about that.

I don't like that ending. The elder brother fuming. The father pleading. The party going on inside.

But that is not the end of this story either because Dad has one more chance to address the older brother. He speaks to him, and don't miss this part. He says, “*Son.* My beloved son. All that I have is yours. I have *two* sons, and both of them are here. That is why we must celebrate.”

You see, the older son is absolutely right. And his “rightness” is precisely what keeps him from celebrating the gift of grace. Grace, which is not divided like a pie but multiplied like loaves and fish. Grace, which is not diminished by distribution. Grace, which expands every time it is extended. Grace, which just keeps pursuing the lost no matter whether they have run many, many miles away or are simply hiding in plain sight. There was a man who had *two* sons.

I can tell you this firsthand. The knowledge that you are right is cold comfort when you are all alone, fuming in your rightness over grace offered to those who are undeserving.

So at least one question this parable asks of us is this: Where does being right keep you from being gracious? Where does being right keep you from being joyful? Where does being right keep you from the celebration? Where does being right keep you from being together?

Not long ago I was talking to a friend, and the topic of summer travel came up. My friend explained that he had made the decision not to visit his family this summer. Why? Because of a horrible disagreement over the 2020 presidential election. The last time the family was all together, things had gotten heated, and he didn't want to deal with it again. Now, look. My friend is right, at least as far as I'm concerned. When it comes to the debate, he is right. And yet, I couldn't miss the sadness in his voice as he described how disappointed his children were by the decision not to see their grandparents this summer.

I thought about that older brother. You see why these stories got Jesus in so much trouble? You see why I avoided preaching this parable for twenty years? It's uncomfortable. It's not fair! The robe... the ring...a new pair of shoes...a party. This irascible God who keeps seeking the lost, even when we are the lost. This gracious God who keeps inviting the undeserving, even when we are the undeserving.

My friends, you can be right, but here's the thing.
Here's the thing. You can be right, but here's the
thing. They are your parents. She is your sister. He
is your brother. They are yours. You belong to them.
You can be right, but here's thing. They are your
neighbors. They are God's children, and you are too.

You can be right, but here's the thing. They were lost.
Now they're found. You were alone. Now we're all
here. Without you, the family wouldn't be complete.

You can be right, or you can come to the party. Just
come home. Amen.