



## Part II—Finding Our Joy

### LESSON FOUR

# The Prodigal Child, the Eldest Child, and the Devoted Parent



#### SCRIPTURE

Luke 15:11–32

#### MAIN IDEA

God offers grace and love, not because of what we do, but because of who we are—beloved children of God.

#### Opening Prayer

*Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God, you are faithful still.<sup>15</sup> For your grace and love, we offer our gratitude and praise to you this day and forever. Amen.*

#### SUMMARY

Some of us have heard the story of the prodigal son as much as we have heard any other Bible lesson. My imaginative side wonders what it would sound like if the benevolent father was the devoted mother. And, what if the prodigal son was the prodigal daughter? Would women and girls hear this story differently and would it reveal the scriptures to us in a different way?

<sup>15</sup> See *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions, Study Edition Revised*, “A Brief Statement of Faith” (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2017.

Through this retelling of the parable of the lost child, we will see that lost people matter to God, and when they are found, it is an occasion for celebration and joy. Like a parent, God is filled with such joy in finding those who are lost that it is the impetus for throwing a big party with friends and neighbors, so that everyone can come and welcome them home.

## LESSON

When Joanna turns sixteen, she is ready to leave her mother's house. She says to herself: "I cannot stand her rules, and I cannot live here anymore. I want to be on my own."

So, she goes to her mother and says: "I am leaving home. No, I do not know what I am going to do. No, I do not have a job, but I have my savings fund!"

You see, her parent started a savings fund for her when she was born. This is not what it was supposed to be used for, but Joanna lobbies her mother to give it to her now. Her mother does not want to do this, and she does not want her to go. But she knows she is not going to stop this child from leaving, and the last thing she wants is to have her baby girl out in the cold with no money. So, against her better judgment, she makes sure her daughter has some food for the journey and her savings fund.

Joanna is ecstatic to be out in the world, up from under the watchful eye of a parent and free to live life on her own terms. She meets her lover almost right away. The first night, the second night, and every night, they stay up partying, drinking with new friends, and spending money like it is going out of style. Joanna pays for drinks all around. She is finally free to do all sorts of things, not worrying about what other people think of her.

You know, it is amazing how fast a person can run through money that it takes another person years

to save. One troubling evening, Joanna's lover finds someone new. So, Joanna is, all of a sudden, alone. Then the day that her young mind cannot imagine comes, the day that her money runs dry. She is in a strange place and is struggling financially. She is in bad shape, just like the local economy.

"I cannot afford my lodging anymore, so I have to move out. I cannot afford food, and I have no means to get from place to place."

Joanna's savings fund, which seemed bottomless, has hit rock bottom, just as she has. She needs to find a source of income, but all she seems to know how to do is eat, drink, and spend. And to her dismay, no one is going to give her money to do that. She begins to live on the street. Her hair looks horrible. Her clothes smell. She finds a public place to run a comb through her hair and wash up, and she finds work.

"I am feeding animals and cleaning up after them. I am so hungry that I would gladly eat the animals' food, as no one is giving me anything to eat."

Then one day, she comes to her senses and finally becomes her mother's child. She realizes what a fool she has been. She says to herself, "The people who work with my mother have money enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I am going home."

She saves up enough for the journey, packs what is left of her possessions and heads home. Before she arrives, she starts going over what she will say when she sees her mother. Meanwhile, Joanna's mother walks outside, as if she is expecting Joanna to come walking up to the house. She looks down the road, as is her routine, and her mind starts playing tricks on her. She thinks she sees her daughter. She is losing her mind. Or is she?

"Wait a minute. That really is her. Joanna, is that really you? Joanna? Joanna!" Deep in thought,



Joanna is practicing her speech, "Mother, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your daughter. Treat me like one of the hired workers."

Then she hears her name. She looks up and sees her mother running down the road with her arms outstretched, "Joanna! Joanna!"

Joanna walks quickly, picks up her pace, and then runs . . . right into her mother's embrace. "Mother, I have sinned against heaven and before you . . ."

But, before she can even get her repentance speech out, her mother kisses her and calls out to one of her hired workers: "Zoe, bring me that new dress I just bought for Joanna."

Just like her mother to have a dress for her and have it at the ready to give to her when she sees her.

"And Zoe, bring that ring that I bought for her and those sandals in her room. And, fire up the grill. We have to eat and celebrate for this daughter of mine was dead and is alive again. She was lost and is found!"

And, then the party begins!

The eldest child Abigail returns from the field and says to herself: "I am glad to be home. Why is there music and dancing?"

She sees Chloe, who works with her mother, and asks: "Chloe, what's going on?" "Your sister Joanna has come home, and your mother has killed the fatted calf, because she has her back safe and sound."

Abigail's anger builds. She refuses to go in to the party. Her mother comes out and pleads with her: "Come join the party, dear Abigail. Your sister is back. Come and celebrate with us."

"Mother, all these years I have worked my fingers to the bone for you. I just returned from working

in the field, and I have never disobeyed you or complained. So where is my party? When have you ever killed a fatted calf for me? You have not even given me a young goat to celebrate with my girlfriends. But your slutty daughter comes home after spending all your money in the streets, and there is music and dancing for her."

Then her mother says to Abigail: "Daughter, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice, because this sister of yours was dead and has come to life; she was lost and has been found."

### **Finding Our Joy**

One might wonder if the prodigal child was seeking to find a joy-filled life? It seems that the things that we think will give us joy sometimes bring us more challenges. As the saying goes, we sometimes underestimate how good we have it until it is gone.

While this passage is often named the parable of the Prodigal Child, it is not really about the lost child or even the eldest child but is about the compassionate parent, or in the retelling of the story, the devoted mother. God is the devoted mother who sees her child returning to the house, and finding her lost child gives God great joy. It is an occasion for a community-wide celebration.

### **Lost People Matter to God**

The parable of the Prodigal Child, the Eldest Child, and the Devoted Parent follows the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. These stories show that lost people matter to God, and when those who are lost have been found, it is a joyous occasion for all of us to celebrate.

Robert Karris suggests, "God's mercy, indeed, is as foolish as a shepherd who abandons 99 sheep to save one, as a woman who turns her house

upside down to recover a paltry sum, and as a Jewish father, who joyfully welcomes home his wastrel son . . .”<sup>16</sup> This retelling of the parable of the prodigal child shows God as a devoted mother. There is precedent for this in these passages. In Luke 15, we see God the homemaker who searches for her lost coin.

Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews argue that, “Few biblical commentators and preachers make the same link with the figure of the woman in Luke 15:8–10, even though all three parables intend to make the same point. The image of the searching woman is just as adequate a metaphor for the divine as the other two.”<sup>17</sup>

These parables have multiple themes about joy, celebration, community, reconciliation, and welcoming lost people back home and back into the community. There are also themes of forgiveness, grace, worthiness, and repentance. Following the story of the lost sheep, Jesus says, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). Curiously, the prodigal began to repent, but before this child could finish her repentance speech, God, the devoted Mother, receives the child into her grateful arms.

### Activity

Consider if there is a repentance speech that you need to write or rehearse. Or is there one that you would like to hear from another person? If so, what might need to happen to restore your relationship with God and with others?

### Building an Inclusive, Intercultural Community

So, what prompts the telling of these three parables in the first place? Let’s look at the beginning of Luke 15, which reads, “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 he told them this parable” (vv. 1–3).

The eldest child represents these self-righteous Pharisees and scribes. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible uses the word “grumbling.” I like this word, because I can see these leaders doing just that. The eldest child’s behavior is characterized as being angry, offended, and jealous. And, she refuses to go in to the party.

Historically, there were self-righteous people who would not enter a house and eat with sinners. We are reminded of the parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14. The invited guests all made excuses for not coming, so the owner of the house tells his servants to go into the streets and invite those who are poor and physically challenged, “so that my house may be filled” (v. 23).

And earlier in Luke, Jesus calls a tax collector Levi to be one of his disciples. Levi throws a banquet for Jesus filled with tax collectors. Luke 5:30–32 reads, “The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ Jesus answered, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.’”

16 Robert J. Karris, “Luke,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond Edward Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland Edmund Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 707.

17 Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews, *Wisdom Commentary, Luke 10–24* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 445.



Jesus built an inclusive, intercultural community that would form the church after his death and resurrection and created a whole new paradigm in which repentant sinners would be welcome. In the parable of the prodigal child, the parent honors the occasion by serving the fatted calf. Karris writes, "there is a ceremonial robe; a signet ring; shoes, which betoken the status of free people. Meat, which is rarely eaten, marks this as a special occasion."<sup>18</sup>

Those who were seen as undeserving become invited guests to a great banquet. Those who were enslaved are free. People of different genders, various abilities, and different socioeconomic backgrounds are all welcome. Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God! Our savior throws the party and invites those who trust and believe in him to share the feast, which he has prepared.

But some self-righteous people refuse to enter the house and eat with sinners. They do not accept Christ's vision or understand God's joy in celebrating the return of lost people into the community banquet hall.

### Activity

The banquet and the party are just metaphors, or are they? If you are a good cook or good at ordering food for delivery, invite folks over to a dinner party or go out to lunch and extend Jesus' love to others. You can start with friends and neighbors, then extend hospitality to those who have not been fully seen by others, keeping in mind that Jesus served as host at tables and invited lost people into the community banquet hall.

In the parable of the prodigal child, we do not know if the eldest child ever goes inside. Some of us see this behavior as childish, but we are also sanctimonious at times. We know we are all sinners saved by grace, but there are some sins (and sinners) that we cannot forgive. And, we might not go into the church fellowship hall for a supper or reception, if it means we have to sit with these persons.

This is complicated, though, as some have perpetuated atrocities against others that were difficult to survive and are impossible to forget. Some of us are still acknowledging these acts and working on surviving our traumas.

### A Parent's Constant Love

I imagine that one reason Jesus told this story, though, was so that we could see the healing love and grace of God, which is so great, that it is like this parent's love for her child.

In a part of the biblical story that we do not always pay attention to, the devoted parent goes out to the eldest child, who has refused to come in, and speaks to her, "Daughter, you are always with me. I could throw you a party, but I rejoice every day because of you." What good words to hear from a loving parent.

Notice that both the lost child and the eldest child are loved, simply because they are God's children. I remember my parents saying to me, "We have talked about this, that all of our children are unique and different, and we love you all." My parents, my Sunday school teachers, pastors, and members of my church taught me that God loves us when we are good and even when we are immature, self-righteous sinners who do not recognize how bad our choices have been.

It brings me to tears that God loves us so much. What Jesus was saying when he told this story was God never gets tired of giving God's love away. God offers us grace, forgiveness, and love, not because of what we do or have done, but because of who we are, a beloved daughter, a beloved sibling, a beloved child of God.

## Closing Prayer

*Loving God, how can we fully express our love and thanks to you for your welcome, forgiveness, and invitation to sit at table with you at your great banquet? May your faithfulness inspire us all to spread the good news of your love throughout the world. Amen.*

## Reflection Questions

1. Author and advocate Bryan Stevenson said, "I believe each person in our society is more than the worst thing they've ever done."<sup>19</sup> What does this mean to you?
2. How can we move through and past our traumas and celebrate our return, even if it means that we will be different than we were before?
3. What would it take for you to live a joy-filled life?
4. What does this parable teach us about repentance and forgiveness?
5. What is the source of your joy?
6. How can we follow Christ in welcoming and valuing all of God's children from different genders, cultures, physical abilities, and backgrounds?

19 Barrett, Paul, "Bryan Stevenson's Death-Defying Acts," in *NYU Law Magazine* (New York: New York University School of Law, 2007), <http://magazine.law.nyu.edu/index.html%3Fp=2690.html>.



*The Prodigal, Deborah Nell*

## FINDING RESILIENCE PENDANT/CHARM

God offers unconditional love and grace for all, not because of what we do or have done, but because of who we are, beloved children of God. Wear or give Deborah Nell's art, *The Prodigal*, found in lesson 4, as a reminder that God is always faithful, and always welcomes us home.

Item #HZN25300, \$10 (order from [presbyterianwomen.org/shop](http://presbyterianwomen.org/shop) or call 800/533-4371, Monday–Friday, 10 am to 5 pm EST. Price does not include shipping.)



## LESSON FOUR NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slightly textured appearance with some minor discoloration and small dark spots, possibly from age or handling. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

## Suggestions for Leaders

### LESSON FOUR: The Prodigal Child, the Eldest Child, and the Devoted Parent

#### Central Concept

When one of God's children returns to the community of the faithful, God is the first to welcome the lost with open arms of forgiveness, embrace, and joy! This is a deep joy that embodies the magnitude and persistence of God's love expressed most profoundly in God's Son, Jesus, the Christ. Followers of Christ can choose joy and extend God's welcoming embrace to all!

#### Connect

(15 minutes) Prepare and hang a banner or sign with "Joy!" in your meeting space—the more colorful the better. Welcome participants with a reminder that Lesson 4 is the first of three on the theme of Joy. Begin by inviting the group to shout out synonyms of the word joy, and list them on a large board or poster. Then invite folks to think of opposites of joy and write them in a second column. Ask, "If I add 'Deep' in front of joy, what additional synonyms might that suggest?" Add them to the list. Ask, "If I add 'Christian' in front of joy, how might you describe that?" Add these.

Ask participants to turn to a neighbor and name some things that bring feelings of joy. Then make a point of naming at least one thing that brings you "deep" or "Christian" joy.

Finally, in the whole group, ask, "What substantive difference did you hear between things that bring joy and things that bring deep or Christian joy?"

#### Consider

(25 minutes) Divide participants into three groups. Create more groups if your total group is larger than 15 and double up on character assignments. Give each group one of the three characters—the older brother, the younger brother, and the father. Provide the following questions for their exploration.

1. Read the story in Luke 15:11–32, thinking of yourselves as your assigned character throughout,

watching this story unfold as you read. What are your feelings at the initial parting of ways? What are your feelings as the time passes and you are separated as a family? When you imagine the possibility of a homecoming, what do you hope will happen? The moment of homecoming has arrived—what is your primary emotion? It is two months after the reunion. What do family relationships look like now, and why?

2. The father says, "We had to celebrate and rejoice." What feelings might accompany the reconciliation of persons after a deep and long separation? What might "rejoice" mean in this situation?
3. What kinds of situations can you imagine causing feelings of deep separation between a person and God?
4. In silence, take some time to recall if you have ever felt separated from God, and what caused that sense of separation. If willing, summarize your story for your group, or simply tell how you felt.
5. Be prepared to bring back to the whole group two or three insights into feelings of separation and feelings of reconciliation.

(15 minutes) After hearing from small groups, explore with the following.

The Bible study author retells the story with three women as the characters, introducing an image of God as female. What characteristics does God have as a woman in these biblical passages? What do they add to your image of God?

1. "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them" (Hos. 11:3–4).
2. "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (Is. 66:13).



3. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is. 49:15).
4. [Jesus said]: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34).

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

(10 minutes) The author reminds us that in one of the three stories in Luke about "the lost," the God figure is a woman. Read Luke 15:8-10 aloud: "[Jesus said,] Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Ask the group.

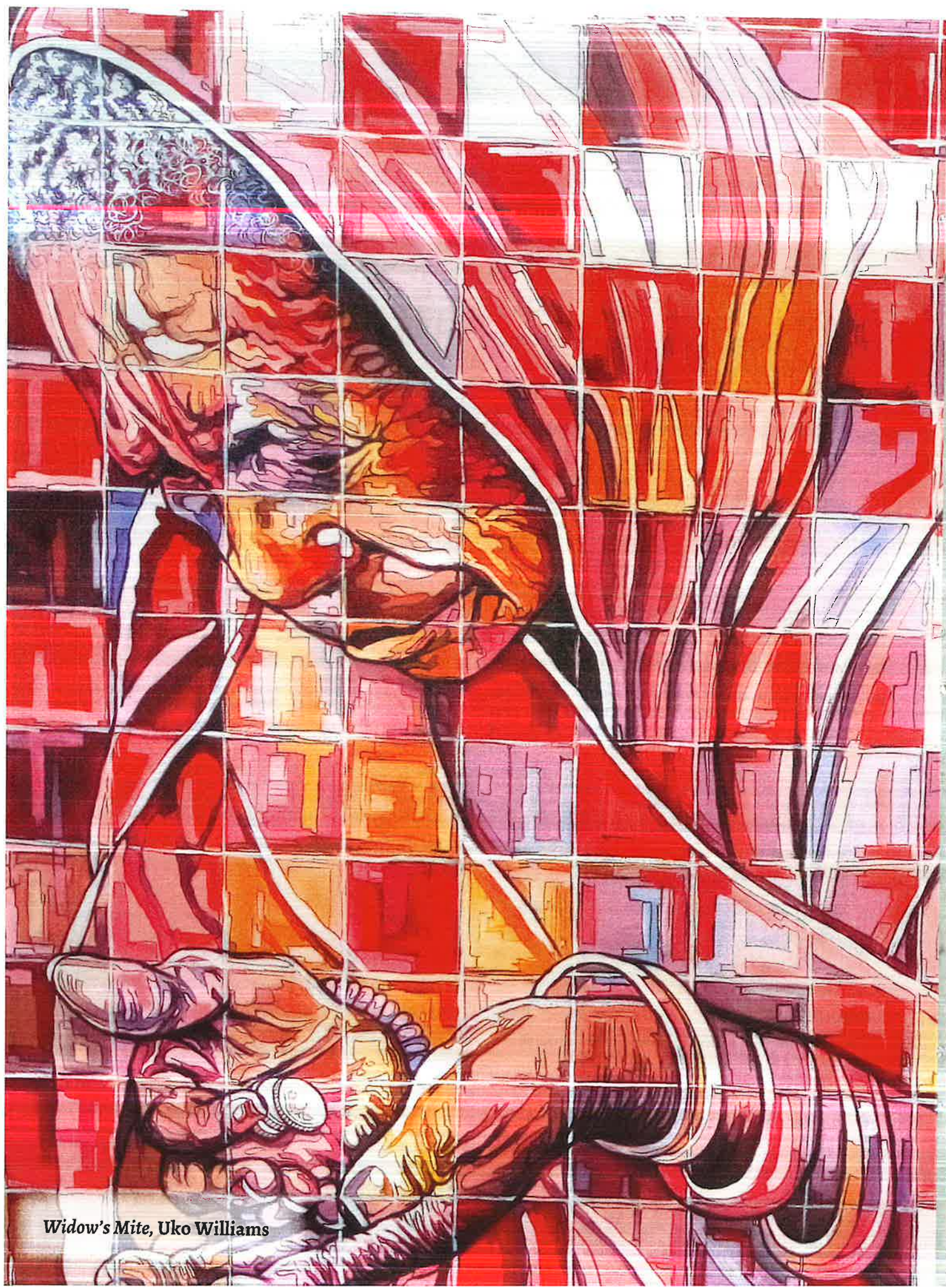
1. What characteristics of God do you hear in this story?
2. This story also highlights joy and rejoicing. Why might finding something lost occasion great joy?
3. What elicits great joy from you?

### **Commune and Commit**

(10 minutes) Ask participants to think about how and when they might more consciously and frequently choose joy and offer a brief time of silence for their reflection. Then invite those who are willing to name a way or a time they will choose joy between now and the next time you meet.

Pray the lesson's Closing Prayer and offer this charge and benediction from Philippians 4:4-8.





*Widow's Mite*, Uko Williams