

Sunday, March 27, 2022 – “God’s Story”  
– Bible Study & Reflection on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (*The Message* by Eugene Peterson).

<sup>1-3</sup> By this time a lot of men and women of questionable reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story.

<sup>11-12</sup> Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

<sup>12-16</sup> “So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to feel it. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corn-cobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

<sup>17-20</sup> “That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

<sup>20-21</sup> “When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

<sup>22-24</sup> “But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a prize-winning heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

<sup>25-27</sup> “All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.’

<sup>28-30</sup> “The older brother stomped off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, ‘Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!’

<sup>31-32</sup> “His father said, ‘Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!’”

Besides the parable of the Good Samaritan, are any of Jesus’ parables more greatly beloved than the one in this week’s Gospel? It’s The Story of the Lost Son. It is the third of three stories that Jesus tells in Luke 15: The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7); The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10); The Parable of the Prodigal Son and His Brother (Luke 15:11-32). All of these stories involve recovery and reclamation of something that was lost, followed by a

celebrative party: A shepherd leaves his flock of ninety-nine sheep to search for the one lost sheep and then throws a party when he returns home with the lost sheep. A woman having ten silver coins loses one of them and cleans house until she finds it. Then she celebrates with her friends. A father longingly waits for the homecoming of his wayward son. The father throws a huge party, and the younger son's elder brother sulks in seemingly righteous indignation. All these stories are also stories of a sinner's repentance, a sinner's turning around and moving in a different direction. They are stories of a changed outcome that was also found in last Sunday's Gospel (Luke 13:1-9).

The context in which Jesus tells these stories is very important. He tells us these parables in response to the Pharisees and religious scholars who criticized Jesus for associating and carousing among "sinners." It's also worth noting that Jesus' third parable (Luke 15:11-32) doesn't contain any reference to the word "repentance." By not mentioning repentance, it responds to the legal experts and Pharisees in a somewhat different way. The characters found in the three parables behave in different ways. The shepherd and the woman are those on the margins of society, while the father and his sons seem to be members of a well heeled and privileged family. The third parable has more details and twists, and it turns on the plot that contains many complexities and ambiguities.

Because these parables are so familiar to us, we are apt to overlook the odd behavior of the actors. They are describing movements within God's Realm that are quite different from the way our assorted "kingdoms" (read governments, organizations, even families) operate. God's ways are not our ways. The Gospel is not simply to be equated with conventional wisdom.

For example, the younger son shows unimaginable impudence in demanding his inheritance. He, in effect, asks his father to drop dead. Is there any other way to put the will into effect? By custom, the father is expected to give his wealth to his elder son, but the father owes nothing to the younger son. By granting the younger son's request, the father appears foolish, breaking with tradition and with legal precedent. What prominent, dignified father would lower himself to run out and so enthusiastically welcome back his wastrel son? The father not only welcomes his wayward son back, even after the son has squandered all of the father's hard earned wealth. But in addition, the father refuses to hear the son's apology and then throws a huge, expensive party as if the younger son was some sort of returning hero. The father restores this good for nothing son to full status in the household, symbolized by the robe, ring, and sandals.

Are not the father's actions recklessly permissive and extravagant, setting a bad precedent? Is the younger son earnestly repentant, or is he a desperate, unrepentant, unredeemed, nothing short of a scheming scoundrel? The story says only that the younger son "came to his senses" (Luke 15:17). Of course he does! He is reduced to eating pig slop, just desserts for his "extravagant living." Perhaps by being nonspecific about the returning son's repentance, the story does not want to us to make this a model story about the importance of sincere, dramatic repentance. Maybe we are not to focus on the younger son as an example but rather upon the father as an indication of who God is and what God is up to. Perhaps rather than titling this story, "The Prodigal Son," it would be better titled and remembered as, "The Unexpectedly Gracious Father."

Then there is the problem of the older brother. He breaks the plot of the two parables in Luke

15:4-10. One sheep was lost while ninety-nine stayed together. A woman searched for a coin while holding on to nine. Both sons in this family are lost, including the one who never left home. When the older brother first appears in Luke 15:25, we know he is angry and alienated. His anger is focused, not so much on the father's welcome of his younger brother but rather upon the extravagant party. The older brother refuses to enter the house, speaking to his father not as "Father" but as "this son of yours." The elder brother's reaction seems reasonable, when you think about it. His long years of service seem to have been simply taken for granted. He was not invited to the party. Perhaps the older brother is there to underscore the utter unreasonableness and outrageousness of the father. The father's throwing of the party for the son who returns is a violation of the standards of justice. The older brother is justified in his outrage. The father is just not playing fair. The father's graciousness is indeed a scandal.

Maybe God's graciousness can also be a scandalous challenge to our sense of how God prefers to act. Maybe the Parable of the Prodigal Son is not all about us. Maybe it's all about God. Maybe it's God's continuing story toward us and toward those we may deem unworthy of God's extravagant welcome, forgiveness, and love. Yes, God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. That's something to keep in mind when we look at the lives of our neighbors.

Grace & Peace,

Pastor Greg Rupright