

DOWNLINE MINISTRIES

North Little Rock, Arkansas

The Gospel of Luke 15:1-32

Phillip D. Fletcher

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? It is the question Christians, historians and atheists consistently ask. Christians of all stripes say that he is the Son of God. Historians do not go as far to affirm his divinity but suggest he was a revolutionary at worst and a great teacher at best. Atheists argue that the Jesus we read in the Bible today is nothing more than the assembly of mythical stories and events meant to support a fledgling poor middle eastern group of men and women.

We affirm, we confess in our preaching, singing, prayers, and testimonies that Jesus is not only the Son of God but yes he is revolutionary as well. He is revolutionary regarding his teaching and what he proclaimed as God's ordained Messiah to inaugurate the will of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The will of God is expressed in the Gospel of Luke in this statement by Jesus in Luke 24:46, "The Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem."

Beginning from Jerusalem.

It would be at Jerusalem; Christ would be lifted up on a cross. It would be at Jerusalem that Christ would triumph over all powers and principalities, securing for his people their atonement. It would be from Jerusalem that Christ would be vindicated in his resurrection and from there...he would ascend to the right hand of the majesty on high.

At Jerusalem known as the city of David, God's servant and son would assume his throne and his welcoming mercy would be proclaimed to all ethnic groups.

So twice Luke in his Gospel states that Jesus has his eyes set on Jerusalem. He is moving from Galilee which has been the base of his operations and is now moving south towards the capital city, David's city, the city of God. This is not by accident but he has purpose and intent- to move through Israel and proclaim the kingdom of God-to ascend to the right hand of the Father in power and authority.

"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51)

*"He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem."
(Luke 13:22)*

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Jesus Christ is king and not for us only but for the whole universe. And on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus lays out what his eternal reign will accomplish and what it will look like.

Our main text comes on the heels of some very important themes in the kingdom of God. These are themes that have great value and importance as we disciple men and women in the kingdom. The

kingdom of God is not an abstract reality or concept but it is a tangible reality, a supernatural dawning that has been inaugurated in Christ. So we can talk about the value of a person-man and woman, rich and poor, accepted and outcast- in relation to the law (Lk 14:1-5; 7-11 and 12-24).

Luke is also careful to highlight that Jesus has this propensity to want to explain the reality of the kingdom and teach on the kingdom in the context of feasting and celebration (Lk 14:1, 7 and 12). Finally, these important themes are concluded with a discussion on discipleship and what is the cost of being a useful disciple of Christ (Lk 14:25-33).

Our main text this morning is really one parable. Now let's remember that Jesus is telling parables for a purpose. Luke records from his interviewed witnesses that the purpose of parables is to give to Jesus people, *"to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand"* (Lk 8:10).

Jesus is answering a charge from the religious leaders-scribes and Pharisees-concerning his communion with tax collectors and sinners. This parable is given to these scribes and Pharisees *"so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand."* Like the master teacher that he is, Jesus answers the charge in three ways yet the answer is the same. This parable is like a trilogy. In verses 3-7 we read about a man and his lost sheep. In verses 8-10 we read about a woman and her lost silver coin and in verses 11-32 we read about a man and his lost son.

Why all the fuss about eating with tax collectors and sinners? The scribes and Pharisees throughout Jesus ministry have been zealous to find a charge to discredit Jesus and his message. This is not the first time we see this charge against Jesus. In Luke 5:30 the scribes and Pharisees grumbled or murmured against Jesus as he ate with a large company of "these people." Then in Luke 19, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem to ascend, people "grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." This man Zacchaeus, a Jewish tax collector dined with Jesus.

I appeal to these two texts because it is the response by Jesus that helps us to understand the beauty of this parable in Luke 15. In Luke 5:30 and 19 Jesus responds, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." "Salvation has come to this house since he also is a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Jesus is proclaiming the kingdom message which involves welcoming those who discern their unrighteous, sick and lost condition. The kingdom of God welcomes those men and women in the context of celebration and feasting-found also in Luke 5 and 19-because these "lost" have experienced repentance. And for those who are whole and believe they are righteous, they will not come into enjoy the celebration and feasting.

The history of Israel is a rich history of divine calling, divine intervention, symbols, stories and prophecy. Israel has experienced suffering, redemption, trials and travail. Her history is also one of idolatry. We can read the Old Testament text and see large swaths of evidence of Israel turning her back on her covenant God for man-made gods, wealth and alignment with other nations. She wandered away from

the loving embrace of her shepherd. She is God's treasure dwelling in darkness. She has chosen wealth and individuality apart from communion with the eternal Father.

The history of Israel is therefore one of *exile* because of her idolatry and the consequence was being taken away by Assyrians and Babylonians. Her history is the hope of *resurrection* as she awaits YHWH to restore her to her proper place as the people of God. This return from exile through resurrection also involves *new creation* as the people of God celebrate being once again in the presence of God.

As Jesus tells this parable of what I have come to believe is the commitment of God to bring up from death to life a people that would rejoice in him, let's pay attention to these three elements:

- Exile that is described as wandering from the open country being hidden in darkness and a journey into a far country
- Resurrection that is described in all three parts of the parable as "lost now found"
- New Creation which involves the sheep, coin and son being reunited with the owner and a joyful celebration ensues.

These items are critical to our understanding of this parable because it is in this Jewish context that Jesus is coming and proclaiming parables that are clearly upsetting the common religious order of the day. Each portion of this one parable is tied together to tell one point: YHWH is committed to welcoming back those in exile for the express purpose of resurrection and enjoyment in the Father who is through sacrificial love has accomplished this in Jesus Christ.

First let's look at the commitment of God in Christ regarding *exile*.

Jesus opens up part 1 of the parable by appealing to shepherd language. The scribes and Pharisees are familiar with this language as they are viewed as the shepherds of the Israelites. Remember Jesus is in his vocation as the fulfillment of Israel as king, prophet and priest. Therefore it should be no surprise to us that Jesus will use language familiar to these grumbling scribes and Pharisees.

So when we read that there is a lost sheep and the shepherd goes after the sheep in order that there would be wholeness in the flock again, it would be no surprise for these scribes and Pharisees to hear Ezekiel in the background.

Ezekiel 34:4, 11, 12, 16

God accuses the leaders (shepherds) of Israel of not caring for his people (sheep). Part of their responsibility was to bring the strayed back into the fold (covenant community of God). They, the shepherds elected instead to make themselves fat. YHWH proceeds to prophesy through Ezekiel that he (YHWH) will seek the sheep out himself and gather them.

"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. (Eze 34:11-12)

How does this inform the stories Jesus is telling? Jesus is taking upon himself that he is the fulfillment of this prophesy as he continually eats with tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes and those that discern their unrighteousness. He is the shepherd bringing them back from exile and into the fold. Jesus is the shepherd, "the servant David" whom God has sent to carry out the gathering and feeding. It is now time to rejoice and celebrate.

Second, let's look at the commitment of God in Christ regarding *resurrection*.

Each portion of the parable has as its zenith the finding or recovery of what was lost. The commitment of the one in pursuit is amazing. In part 1 regarding the sheep, the shepherd finds the sheep and lays it on his shoulders. In part 2, the woman is diligent in bringing light into her home, cleaning her home until she finds it. In part 3, the father is compassionate; he runs embraces and kisses his son. The object of the owners love and affection is recovered and there is implied in each event that completeness or as the Israelites would describe-*shalom*.

Being lost, in darkness and face deep in the slop of pigs is Jesus shocking manner of communicating the depth of the sickness and unrighteousness that must be overcome. Those out there, outside the kingdom are unable to find their way home. The darkness is so great that it requires a great light to conquer the prevailing despair that accompanies being away from your owner. Being found, dwelling in light and standing face to face with my loving and embracing father will only come about when he powerfully works to come and lets me know that I am his.

So, resurrection is not just God giving us new bodies that are imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual (1 Cor 15). That will be an indescribable moment as we will in a powerful moment become who we are truly to be. Resurrection prepares those that are in need of God-the great physician- the ability to enjoy the complete and infinite love that is given by God and demonstrated in his relentless work to bring a people to himself.

Third let's look at the commitment of God in Christ regarding *new creation*.

He is making all things new! The hope of Israel that finds her fulfillment in Jesus Christ is the fact YHWH is making all things new. Exile has been triumphed over. Resurrection makes us able to enjoy the complete and infinite love of God. New creation is God's commitment for us to relate to him in a new way of life.

What do I mean? In the third act of the parable, Jesus focuses on the father and states that *"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him"* (Lk 15:20).

We tend to view forgiveness in negative terms; “let go of the wrong,” “an unwillingness to forgive produces bitterness.” What does forgiveness look like in positive terms? It is demonstrated in a father who was treated as dead and who demonstrates an overwhelming emotion from the deepest part of his soul. Forgiveness is excitement and the freedom to demonstrate unbridled and holy love to an individual or group that has sinned against you.

Jesus description of the father in Luke 15:20 is possibly Jesus using the history of Israel to convey the powerful reality of God’s kingdom.

In Genesis 33:4: Esau and Jacob have been estranged because Jacob defrauded Esau of his birthright. It is Esau who sees Jacob and runs to him and they have a great moment of embrace. It is the defrauded or disrespected family member who initiates the reconciliation.

How does this inform Jesus telling of the parable? Jesus applies the history and action of Esau to the father in the story. The father was essentially disrespected by his son in the presence of the community and when the son returns it is the father who demonstrates great compassion by running, embrace and kissing. It is a beautiful picture of reconciliation and forgiveness.

What is the story of true Israel? The story of true Israel is God running to embrace his firstborn son-Jesus Christ -carrying with him men and women who have been found wandering from the open country, lost in the house of the world and wallowing in sin and despair.

This is the beautiful picture of new creation that is initiated by the sovereign. We relate to God in the new way that has been opened up Jesus Christ.

Therefore, Jesus is teaching through parable that YHWH is committed to going out to those in exile because of sin; embrace them in a manner that utterly surprising and give us a new way in which to live with him. Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus eats with them in order to display the mercy and joy of God that has been promised and waited on for hundreds of years.

Jesus is challenging the religious leaders and their assumptions about God’s work- of reconciliation from exile and resurrection- bringing people into the kingdom of God are completely different. He is coming for the lost and exiled.

Religious opposition is not new in the Israelite history. When God was announcing and implementing his work to bring about the culmination of his purposes in Christ there was opposition. From Abraham to Moses; the Judges to the Kings; from the return from Babylonian exile to rebuilding the wall there has always been opposition.

Jesus puts the grumbling scribes and Pharisees in the parable as the older brother. The anger and pride that is evident in the older brother keeps him blind to the father’s great mercy and absent from the great feasting.

What can we learn here?

An unwillingness to value a person made in the image of God who has been reconciled to God will result in us being outside the rejoicing community of God.

We need to be able to tell new parables where God uses us to call those in exile to know resurrection and new creation in the face of religious opposition.

What parables can you construct to communicate that the Jesus who went to Jerusalem and ascended to his throne by way of a cross and his resurrection, is now at work in you and your context? As Jesus was to Israel, we are now to be to the world. God has given us his Holy Spirit to tell new stories, to have festive gatherings with pimps, prostitutes, meth addicts, homeless and felons. The Church is going into exiled and dark places telling stories of “repentance and forgiveness of sins being proclaimed in his name to all nations...”

Therefore, come into the party. Come and celebrate with your Father.