

## Surprising Stories of Jesus: The Parable of Parables

Luke 15: 11-32

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When I was serving churches in Wisconsin, I had a joint confirmation class, and I planned a weekend trip to Chicago.

The plan was to leave midday on Saturday and go to Willow Creek church, the mother ship of white Evangelical mega churches, for worship on Saturday night; then wake up the next morning and go to Trinity UCC on the South Side of Chicago. Trinity's motto is "unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian." Trinity experienced explosive growth under the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's leadership and had recently become famous Barack Obama's church.

I get everything organized. We have two vans. I have a volunteer going with me to drive one van. A parent gives me their family's van to drive. We meet. We drive to Chicago. We are on time. We drive to this evangelical mega church. We are waved into the parking lot with parking attendants directing traffic like we we're at a rock concert. We worship. We eat, and check into the hotel. I lock all the youth in their rooms, and we sleep a little bit. The next morning, all the youth are downstairs, dressed and ready for church, eating a really bad continental breakfast. I eat my own very bad continental breakfast and throw my paper plate and orange juice cup in the trash. Everything is going according to plan. I am knocking this trip out of the park.

One of the youth asks, "Pastor Todd, may we start putting our bags in the van?" "Yes!" I reach for the keys to this van that I had borrowed from a parent, only to discover that the keys are not in my pocket where they always are.

I calmly walk outside to see if the van is in the parking lot, to make sure it hasn't been stolen. It's there. I walk to the van to see if the doors are open. They are locked. I look inside the windows to see if the keys are on the floor, on the seat, in the ignition. They are not.

The keys to the van, that I had borrowed from a parent, that I would need to drive the youth back to their homes, are gone.

Meanwhile, youth are asking, "Pastor Todd, why are you looking in the windows of the van? Pastor Todd, why can't we get into the van right now? Pastor Todd, why aren't you saying anything? Isn't it time for us to start getting going, Pastor Todd?"

I walk in circles around the parking lot looking for keys. I walk into the lobby and look everywhere I had been. I walk to my room, look around, check the hallways, nothing. I'm getting very nervous. I go to the Continental Breakfast area with all of the people eating their food-like substances, and I vaguely remember something. When I threw my plate and cup away forty five minutes ago, did I have my keys in my hand? Did I throw my keys in the trash?

Desperate, I had no better leads. So, in the middle of a bunch of people in this hotel in Chicago, I took off the lid of the trash can, and started digging in. Meanwhile the youth are asking, "Pastor Todd, what are you doing? Pastor Todd, why are you digging through the trash? Pastor Todd, did you lose something?"

I start at the top. Nothing. ¼ of the way through. Nothing. Halfway through the trash can. Nothing. I can't hear anything because all I can hear is the blood pulsing in my ears. And then I pull up a plate and see a shiny, gooey set of keys. My desperation turned to rejoicing.

At the beginning of chapter 15 of Luke, the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. They are troubled that Jesus is eating with the sort of people who have gone off the path, people who don't care if their actions hurt people, people who don't seem to have a conscience, people who aren't changing. Jesus is hanging out with them.

In response, Jesus starts telling stories. "Have you ever lost something and been really desperate to find it? Say you have 100 sheep and lose one, what are you going to do? You are going to find the lost sheep and then throw a party when you find it. A woman has 10 coins, she loses one, what is she going to do? She is going to turn the house upside down until she finds a coin and then she's going to throw a party when she finds it."

Then, Jesus tells a story about a lost person, a person like the tax collectors and sinners. He tells a story about those moments when people are desperate for life. He tells a story about what God's love and grace are like. He tells a story where there is hurt and jealousy and righteous anger.

"There was a man who had two sons...The younger asks his father for his inheritance early. He treats his father like he's already dead and only worth the money he can give him.

The young son goes off, wastes all the money until he is working on a hog farm, the ultimate disgrace, and he's starving. This younger son is playing the part of the tax collector and the sinner, and he's doing a great job of it. He's the sort of guy that the scribes and Pharisees are grumbling about. He's the sort of guy that Jesus is hanging out with.

Then the story turns and Jesus is saying something important in this turning. He's saying that people can change, that's things can change, that's he's counting on it. God's leaving that door open. There's hope.

The story says the young son "comes to himself." He realizes how foolish, and disrespectful he has been. This is a repentance moment. There's interior dialogue so the reader knows we can trust that the son is changing. There are other gospel stories where we get inside the thoughts of a character and we see just how selfish or foolish they are, but this is something else. We see him practicing his speech to his father. He humbles himself. He's really changing. He's ready to turn his life around.

As the young son turns around, we realize that he is searching too. He's desperate, to find the life that he's lost, to find the keys that he has thrown in the trash. The only thing he can do is humble himself and return home, and trust Love to do something. He's not asking for Love to do much, because he knows what he has done. But he has some hope that Love can do something.

As the son goes home he discovers his father has been waiting for him. When the son is far off, the father runs to meet him. In the time of Jesus it was undignified for a man to run. The Father can't help himself. He's found that one thing, that one person that he's lost. He's rejoicing. There's a celebration.

We see love doing more than we expect. We see that there is more love and grace than we imagined. This is the part that Jesus is playing as he's sitting with tax collectors and sinners. This is the posture of God, towards the world, that is broken, and hurting and scarred. God is not turning away. God is ready to offer more love than we expect, more grace, more healing. Love can do more than we think.

Then there's the older son. The older son plays the part of the Pharisees and the scribes who are grumbling that Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. The son is grumbling that the father will be partying with the younger son after all that he's done. They won't sit down and eat. The son won't go into the party.

Of course, we know that the scribes and the Pharisees, and the younger son, are expressing the feelings of anyone who plays by the rules, of anyone who is taking responsibility, of anyone who tries to follow religious teachings, let alone the teachings of Jesus. We are probably the older son, the scribes and Pharisees. We're friends.

Deep down, though, what is the older son expressing? He's expressing, "but what about me? You haven't noticed me. You haven't shown that sort of excitement about me. You

haven't celebrated me. You should love me more. You're loving him more than you are loving me. I'm the one doing it right. How could you love him more after all that he's done. How could you do this to me?"

The response of the father to the older son is simply, "I love you too." It's the response of God to all who are trying to do it right. It's the response of Jesus to the scribes and the Pharisees. There's no rebuke. There's understanding of the feelings, and an affirmation of the place of others in the circle. "I love you too," the father is saying. "You are always with me. What is mine is yours." That love won't go away. It will be there for you. But did you notice that we found the lost? Did you notice that more than one life took a big steps towards wholeness. That's a win."

The story ends before we see if the brother goes into the party. It ends before we can watch the ups and downs of any life that is changing for the better. The story ends before we get to see how this family will start to pull the pieces of their relationships back together.

This story just leaves us with some assertions about life and faith. People can change, things can change, there's hope. God leaves that door open. The assertion that Love can be trusted to do more than we think. The assertion that Love will always be there for us, if we are desperately searching for life we've lost. Or, if we are jealous of the attention someone else receives, or angry at what someone else is getting away with, Love will still be there for us.

Jesus invites us to trust. Amen.