



The Holy Spirit Province NEWSLETTER

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THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

Joshua 5:9-12; Romans 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Day after day, Jesus on earth shows pastoral care for all sorts of people. But he shows a special affection for poor unfortunate persons, and even for extortionists (Zacchaeus, e.g.), and prostitutes. His enemies sneer: 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them' (Lk 15:2).

The warmth and generosity of his human caring and welcome show that in the eyes of God they are not 'rejects,' 'outcasts,' 'losers,' and 'no-hopers.' On the contrary, God wants to put them back together again. So, in and through Jesus, those labelled 'the lost' come to meet the God of the lost. In their defence, Jesus speaks his famous parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

The story of the lost son has been called 'the greatest short story in the world.' It's not really the parable of a prodigal, i.e., of a spendthrift, as it's usually called, but the parable of an incredibly generous father of two sons (see v.11), who in different ways have both lost their way in life.

The parable tells us a great deal about Jesus himself. His own way of acting is the starting point of the story. He's explaining why he 'welcomes sinners and eats with them' (v.2). They are the lost ones, the ones that he is taking home to God. For Jesus, all persons who have strayed from God are not truly themselves. So, as he thinks about his failures and mistakes, the lost son comes to understand that he will be happy again, only in the home and company of his father. Meanwhile, his father is aching for him to return, and as soon as he catches a glimpse of his son trudging along the road, the father starts running to meet him, hug him, and take him home (v.20).

When they reach the house, the father cuts short the son's prepared speech. There's no reprimand, not even a small dose of 'I told you so ...' There's no payback, no penance, no punishment, and no recriminations. Instead, the father is so glad to have his son back home with him again that he gives him the robe of honour, the ring of authority, and the sandals of a son.

The Pharisees, to whom Jesus was telling this story, would have been shocked to the core at how Jesus was keeping company with people who were not only 'outsiders', contact with whom would bring defilement. In a sadistic way, they were looking forward to the destruction rather than the saving of those whom they so readily and self-righteously called 'sinners.'

At the sound of music and dancing, the eldest son comes in from the fields. His father goes out to him and pleads with him to come to the party (v.38). The eldest son believes that he has done everything right, and has spent his whole life slaving away on the family farm. His attitude to his wayward brother is one of utter contempt. He even calls the prodigal 'your son,' not 'my brother.'

In the details of his story, Jesus is saying that our God is not a mean book-keeping God at all, but a warm, gracious, and generous Father who never stops loving, simply because he never stops wanting to save. No matter how often we may turn our backs on God and go away to do our selfish sinful things, God, as in the story, comes running to hug us and take us back. There God treats us not as our mistakes and sins deserve, but with tenderness, compassion, and forgiveness. In the Eucharist, God even throws a party and lavishes on us God's 'welcome home' gifts – Jesus Christ himself in his body and blood.

In conclusion, let me share with you a variation of the story Jesus told. Once there were two priests in the same diocese. One of them drank too much, he was often late for appointments, the parish was deep in debt, and his bookwork was a mess. Yet the people loved him. The other priest was a very capable and careful manager. He was meticulous and exact in everything. His book-keeping was impeccable, and he always treated everyone according to all the rules and regulations of the diocese. His parish had no debt but owned substantial investments. Yet his people didn't think much of him or warm to him at all. That seems unfair. It begs the question: 'What did the first priest have going for him that the other one lacked?' In the light of the story Jesus told, let's try to figure that one out for ourselves!

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