

Mothering Sunday

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Lent 4 C – Lk 15 The parable of the lost sons

It helps us to know who was there when Jesus told today's parable. There seem to have been some notorious sinners and tax collectors. They'd come to hear Jesus' teaching. And watching on were Luke's version of the morality police – some Pharisees and Scribes. They were grumbling loudly enough for us to hear them complain that Jesus *welcomes sinners and eats with them.* ^{Lk 15.2} Gate keepers can be a bit passive-aggressive like that.

Jesus responded with three parables; the parable of the lost sheep rescued and the rejoicing that caused, the parable of the lost coin found – and more rejoicing, and then today's one. But the parable of the lost sons breaks the pattern. Yes, *sons*. The bitter, self-righteous, older son was every bit as lost as his younger brother had been. He wouldn't come home to join in the rejoicing, and that hurt his father terribly. Ironically, this gate-keeper contrived to shut *himself* out.

Jesus was telling the religious officials in three different ways that the tax collectors and sinners who'd come to learn from him were very valuable. This parable says they were like his own children. But they'd got lost. Jesus had come to find them, and they'd come to find him. So they weren't lost any more. Party time!

But the older brother in the parable – the judgmental, bitter one who grumbled about his father giving a feast for *this son of yours!* – does he remind you of anyone? *He welcomes sinners and eats with them!* Yes, the Pharisees and Scribes feature in this parable, don't they. Just as Jesus reached out to the tax collectors and sinners through the younger son, he reached out

to the Pharisees and Scribes through the tragic story of the older son. We never find out what happens to him, or them.

Jesus annoyed the Pharisees and scribes by eating with sinners and tax collectors; he publicly treated these socially ostracised people as if they were legitimate members of the community. But the Scribes and Pharisees thought *they* were the arbiters of who belonged and who didn't. Jesus obviously thought differently. This parable says the sinners and tax collectors who came to him were his lost children, who'd been found. Social convention had given them up for dead, but now they were alive again with him. *These kin of yours were dead and have come to life; they were lost and have been found.* ^{Luke}

15.32

This is the absolute heart of the Gospel. The Gospel explicitly identifies the lost younger son with Jesus himself; dead, but alive again. ^{Luke 15.32} Like that younger son, Jesus left his father and came here squandering his inheritance among people like us to the point of giving up his life. Jesus who died, given up for lost by his friends, Jesus was raised to new life, gave those friends and us another chance at life, and leads us to the Father's house ^{John 14.2} where the party is being prepared for us all.

Don't we see Jesus in the Father running out to embrace his son? Can we hear him whisper in our ear that we are safe now, because we're with him? Come home; come into the eternal, joyous banquet of unconditional, welcoming love!

Jesus came that all might have abundant life ^{John 10.10} – including people we find really difficult to deal with; people who offend against all our instincts and values. He came that *all* might have abundant life.

Even us? The Gospel is showing us, as we enter this parable, that we – even if we've given up on ourselves as lost – even

if other people – even sisters and brothers have given us up for lost – we can see Jesus running out to us, to embrace us and clothe us in the robes of unquestioning belonging; unconditional belonging.

The three parables of the lost tell us how God values us. They tell us how God risks giving us the freedom to learn how valuable our relationships are by experiencing what life is like without them. But they also show us how God has chosen to be vulnerable to us in the love that will brave righteous anger to defend us.

That's the love he calls us to show in our own lives too. Praise God for such scandalous love! Amen.

Mothering Sunday Cake and Posy Blessing

Father and Mother God, giver of all joy:
we ask that you bless this cake and these posies,
so that they may be to us
symbols of our communion with you and with each other.
As they were once scattered over our land
as blossoms and blooms,
grasses, vines, trees and cane,
yet are now one,
so let us in our diversity
be your one redeemed people,
and your delight. Amen.