

C Narrative 28  
March 19, 2017  
Poulsbo  
Pastor Alison Shane

Luke 15:1-32

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable:”

Actually, he told them three. Three parables juxtaposing the found-lost and the never-lost, the repentant sinner and the righteous. Parables always have multiple meanings, characters that are allegories for multiple real lives, layers of implication. On the surface is the story itself. A sheep is lost, 99 are not, the shepherd finds the lost. A coin is lost, 9 are not, the woman finds the lost. One son is lost, One son is not, the father rejoices the return of the lost.

Underneath that layer is one allegory. Luke tells us Jesus is hanging with tax collectors and sinners, but the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling. So the found-lost are those gathered, and the never-lost are the Pharisees. And broader than that, it might be said that the found-lost are the Gentiles, and the never-lost are the Israelites. And more contemporary, it might be said that the found-lost are the nones, or the Muslims, or the Jews, or the atheists...and the never-lost are the Christians.

And a common theme among the three parables is repentance. But don't dig too deeply among the layers of this theme, or you might find that the never-lost, the Pharisees, Israel as a whole, Christians... are just as lost, in just as much need of repentance as the sinners and tax collectors (and before you go all “Luther” on this text and insist that we're all sinners and of course in need of repentance, in that culture those “were the ones who were called that to their face...regularly, relentlessly, publicly, and by everyone.” (David Lose, Daily Bread, 11-1-13)). And if you keep digging into repentance, not only will you find that we are all in need of repentance, but you'll find that the never-lost reaction to the rejoicing over the found-lost is one of disbelief, anger, resentment, and bitterness. It's ugly. And it's us.

And then there's the theme of rejoicing in all three parables. Even with an inanimate coin, Jesus explains the parable, saying, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Not that the coin repents, but that the reaction to the finding of the coin and the repentance of the sinner is the same: rejoicing. And while I think this theme gets the closest to Jesus' purpose in telling these parables, it's still just surface.

These parables are about idiocy.

The last time I was up here, God was working funny. This time, as I read this text, all I could think was “No one in their right mind...”

Shepherd loses a sheep, so he leaves 99 to fend for themselves while he goes off to find one? No one in their right mind would do such a thing. You cut your losses and protect and nurture the 99.

Woman loses a coin, so she searches until she finds it, only to spend it celebrating the recovery with her friends? No one in their right mind would do such a thing. You go to all that

work to find the lost one, you're going to hang on to it. Or at least spend it on the rent or something else useful.

And then there's the story of the prodigal son.

By asking for his inheritance in this culture, the son is wishing his father were dead. These are the words of an angry, petulant, adolescent. No one in their right mind gives in to that.

That inheritance would have been tied up in land and livestock and slaves. It would have been quite a process to sell off half of everything to give to this ungrateful brat. No one in their right mind would go to such great lengths.

The son was gone long enough to spend everything, a famine to set in, all food to be gone, and his pride to topple to his hunger. And yet his father still stands and watches the horizon for him. No one in their right mind would persist in hope.

While the son is still far off, the father sees him, has compassion, runs to him, throws his arms around the boy and kisses him. Running is culturally unacceptable behavior for a wealthy landowner. No one in their right mind would risk social ire and ridicule in this way.

The son begins his well-rehearsed plea (which no one in their right mind would believe is sincere), but the father beckons to the slaves and demands that the boy be clothed, fed, and a no-holds-barred party be thrown. This kid has already spent half the family's money, and now here goes more down the drain. No one in their right mind. This kid rejected being a son, yet the father risks further rejection and betrayal and restores him to his position as son. No one in their right mind.

And that's the point. When one...just one...is lost, God goes out of his mind, not with fear or worry, but with love. God leaves everything (even heaven) to pursue the lost one. God spares no expense (even his son's life) to pursue the lost one. And God pursues that lost one, gauchely running toward that sinner with nothing in his head but the desire to wrap him up in a fierce hug, give him everything, and throw a party (which he brings you every week). The prodigal son (prodigal meaning wasteful spending, extravagance) gives way to the prodigal father: "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

But...those insiders, the never-lost, the Pharisees, the Israelites, the Christians...watch from the outside and wonder, "Has God lost his mind? This just makes our faithfulness meaningless. How can God do this?"

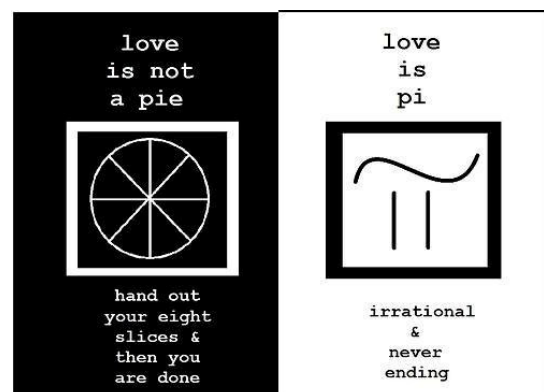
How can God not do this?

Love is not limited goods. We don't need to begrudge another the love God has showered irrationally, idiotically, insanely on that person, because it doesn't lessen the love God has for you.. Love is not a pie to be sliced up and doled out. I can give Ryan all my love and still be able to give Emily all my love. And if I can...how much more can God. How can God not?

### *Graphic*

This graphic hit the lectionary facebook thread about this text on the 14<sup>th</sup> – pi day. "Love is not a pie. Hand out eight slices and then you are done. Love is pi. Irrational and never-ended."

God's irrational love abounds. So why do we resent it showered upon someone who is lost? What are we jealous of? What are we afraid of? And if we truly are that older brother, standing outside the



party, looking resentfully in, why do we love this story so much?

In the words of David Lose, “The reason we treasure this story so much is that, deep down, each one of us wishes we could find someone who loves us as fully and foolishly as this prodigal father does his lost son, someone who will always welcome us home, someone whose forgiveness and acceptance is beyond question...no matter what we have done.

Which is why Jesus tells this parable, of course, to both Pharisee and tax collector...and to us. Because this story provides a summary of the whole gospel: we *do* have such a one.”

Thanks be to God.