
The Prodigal and the Lost

An article from the *Cathedral Times* by Dean Sam Candler

Many of us remember with affection the great “Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32). An impatient and impudent younger son asks his father for a premature distribution of his inheritance. The younger son becomes “prodigal,” a new word for most Sunday Schoolers; we were taught it meant lavishly extravagant, profligate, irresponsibly wasteful, maybe irrationally exuberant. A prodigal person is not careful; he doesn’t care if he loses everything.

But the parable does not end with the irresponsible lavishness of the younger son. The word “prodigal” also describes the father. While the younger son was returning, but still far off, it is the father who becomes irrationally exuberant. Older Christians, past childhood Sunday School age, begin to call this story “the parable of the prodigal father;” for it is the father who is prodigal, lavishly extravagant, running to his younger son and throwing his arms around him. The father calls for the best robe, the finest formal dinner jacket. He calls for a ring. He wants sandals to adorn the very feet which had wandered into perdition. So it is that the father represents the unsearchable grace of God, a grace that rejoices prodigally, pours itself out lavishly, when a lost child returns.

But there is another brother, the older brother. Ah, what sadness for the older brother. His is a disconsolation that resounds through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. All through the Bible, older brothers lose the blessing of God. There is an elder son in the parable, who becomes angry and refuses to go into the house where music and dancing and all sorts of commotion are occurring. They are calling it celebration. But the older son is devastated.

The prodigal father replies that the older son is always with him, and he says, “All that is mine is yours.” But we do not hear again from the older son. The parable leaves him with wasteful and irresponsible bitterness. Perhaps he, too, the older son, is a prodigal character: irresponsibly lavish with anger and resentment. He was willing to lose everything in his anger. Maybe it is he who is lost, now.

This parable of the prodigal men, two sons and a father, becomes complete only as Christians grow older, from childhood morality, to adult grace, and then to the complexities of family life and group dynamics. When we are young, we relate to the prodigal younger son. When we are older, catching our first glimpses of unmerited grace, we relate to the prodigal, graceful, father. When we begin to develop families and households, when we begin to lead organizations and deal with group dynamics, we discover the older son who is so prodigal with his anger and resentment. How will we act when grace is given to others, but not to us?

Of course, we don’t enjoy identifying with the older brother. We don’t enjoy the older brother at our dinner parties either. But we know he is there. He is here. The older brother is part of every household. In fact, the older brother is probably somewhere inside each one of us.

We have choices in life, and this beautiful parable—a masterpiece parable—presents us a model for several of them. We can choose to presume more than we should. We can choose to squander our life with a premature inheritance. We can choose to come to ourselves. We can choose to return to love. We can choose to welcome home the scoundrel. We can choose to drink that special bottle of wine, the one we have been saving forever. We can choose to remain outside the house. We can choose to waste and squander our life with bitterness and resentment. We can choose to celebrate.

As we make those choices, we risk losing things. And the older we get in life, the more things we lose. Apparently, and

amazingly, our God loses things, too. The parable of the prodigal son occurs as the first of three stories that Jesus tells in Luke, chapter fifteen, about lost things. One sheep out of a hundred is lost, but heaven searches for that lost one. A woman loses just one of ten silver coins, and turns the house upside down looking for that one coin. When she finds it, she calls all the neighbors over for a party; "Rejoice with me!" she says.

Maybe losing things is a part of life, and a part of the Christian life. If so, then finding things is also a part of life, and a part of the Christian life. We are meant to find things, and to be lavishly extravagant in our celebrating.

"Child, you are always with me, even if you seem to be lost right now. All that is mine is yours, even if you resent how I use it, and even if someone else claims something too soon and even if that someone squanders it all. All that is mine is yours, what I lose and what I find. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Jesus talked a lot about losing things. And, then, even he was lost. But in Christ, lost things are found. In Christ, we celebrate lavishly and prodigally.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.