

WHAT'S THE NAME OF THAT STORY?

Read Luke 15

The strange thing about “The Story of the Prodigal Son” is that it may not be the story of the prodigal son. Now, don’t get me wrong. The story does give an account of a son who leaves home and squanders “his estate with loose living.” The result is that he becomes “impoverished.” Soon he would “gladly fill his stomach with the pods that the swine are eating.” In these degrading circumstances, he “comes to his senses” and returns home. The narrative seems to be consumed with the recitation of the fall and restitution of this son. However, though the vivid details of the son’s transgression and restoration demonstrate that the prodigal is important to the story, in this Luke 15 narrative, the prodigal son may not be the main character.

Jesus initiated this story because of the calloused thinking of the religious leaders. Like tusk-less wild boars, infuriated, yet impotent, they could do nothing in the midst of the crowds except murmur against this man whose custom it was to dine with sinners and tax collectors (15:1-3). Jesus peered through the crowd at them as he related a parable that included three tales designed to explain his behavior. The first was about a shepherd, the second a homemaker, and the third the father of the prodigal. Utilizing the “key” of repetition each of the following stories, told by Jesus, had common words and phrases yoking them as one.

It took three hours rather than the usual one hour to zigzag up through the underbrush of the mount. Most shepherds would have done the same—a lost sheep meant deprivation for the family. And though the man was searching for the sheep for the sake of his family, there was “another reason,” he told sons he had left behind with the remaining ninety-nine. He twisted his body from the waist up toward the bleat when he heard it. He trotted over, knelt down, and unraveled the animal’s wool from bristly thorns. “Be still, little one,” he said, hoisting the bedraggled but struggling ewe into his arms. “We’re going to have a celebration when we get home. My friends will rejoice with me, because you were lost but now you’re found.”

A frenzied search for her lost coin followed a woman’s playful jingling with the money shortly before. *There were ten yesterday, I know it!* Today, however, there were merely nine. She fingered the coarse tired fabric of the only garment she owned. That lost coin could have purchased a new dress; but now she would have to wait even longer. With desperate but determined movements, she swept under, around, on, and even over everything. “Found it!” she yelled, scampering outside her house to her neighbors’. “We have to have a celebration and rejoice; my coin was lost, but it’s found now.”

Such a waste of time, thought a neighbor as he watched the father pass through fields of hewn barley, to trudge up a trodden down path to his regular place of watchfulness. The neighbor stamped away from the window. “All that kid ever accomplished was to drink and fornicate when he did live here,” the neighbor said to his wife. The father, however, waited. And when the day came that the son appeared in the distance, the father sprinted toward him, embraced him, and kissed him. Before the son could finish babbling his confession, the father summoned his servants to “bring the fattened calf” for a feast. “We must celebrate,” he said to invited neighbors, “and rejoice; for this son of mine was lost and has been found.”

Shepherd, homemaker, and father, each represent a heavenly Father, who, unlike the religious leaders eyeing Jesus because he ate with sinners, rejoices in heaven with the angels when even one sinner repents (Lk.15:7, 10). Jesus was simply mirroring His Father’s actions. Thus, it is no longer perplexing to us that the story of the prodigal son may not be the story of the prodigal son. It is the story of the prodigal’s father, who replicates the heavenly Father who “found” us when we were “lost.” And when we “came to our senses,” He sprinted toward us, too, and there was “great joy in heaven.”