

Community Church of Issaquah

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## Lessons Learned: The Parables of Jesus

### The Lost Son

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We often forget that Jesus was most often referred to as “rabbi” or “teacher.” We tend to think of Jesus as some kind of evangelist, even though we might not even know the meaning of that word. Did you know that an evangelist by definition is one who spreads the good news? I suppose we could use that term with Jesus and it would be accurate, but by practice, Jesus was a teacher. There were so many lessons that he wanted his disciples and followers to know that the Gospels are filled with those lessons which are commonly called the parables of Jesus.

Even though my degrees in college and seminary focused more of teaching than preaching, when you are called into the role of pastor, you don’t have much of a choice, you have to do both. With an objective of conveying the total message of the Bible, pastors write sermons with a goal of doing both – teaching and inspiring. I must confess that my least favorite class in seminary was homiletics. Standing before a class of your peers trying to impress was always painful for me. We would preach a short sermon, then sit and listen to our classmates criticize our work. It was always painful.

But when a minister changes course and offers perspective on some lessons we can learn from the Scriptures, I think that is a much more sensible approach to ministry. For the next four Sundays, I've chosen to be a teacher for you and help us all learn some lessons from four specific parables that Jesus shared with his followers. Today we begin with perhaps my favorite lesson, the parable of the lost son, or as many of us have heard in the past, the prodigal son.

Let's begin with lesson one. One prevailing use of language in the Bible is the reference primarily to men or to males. Yes, there are some stories and references to women, but in general, the Jewish culture of patriarchy is predominant in the Bible. Until recent translations changed the wording from "Brethren" to "sisters and brothers," it was a male dominated society. As we read stories or parables such as this one in which the three main characters are all men, we perhaps need to adjust our thinking to understand that this parables could just as easily have been about a mother and daughter, a father and daughter, or a mother and son. The intent of the story is much broader than the gender of the characters. To gain a deeper meaning of this lesson, we need to understand that Jesus's purpose in sharing the parable was not to placate men, but to impact a message for all parents and children. Let's paint a broader picture and take away the restrictions of limiting our thinking to the pronoun, 'he.'

Lesson two is a lesson I have tried to teach my son for all of his life. It's simply this: each of us has the gift of free will, meaning we can make our own choices when we decide to

do so, whatever that is. In this parable, the son made the decision to seek a better world somewhere away from his home. He gathered all his possessions and took off for what he thought would be a better life. That was him exercising his free will. But as I have told my son hundreds of times, every choice you make has consequences, whether good or bad. In this parable, the consequences were dire. A famine came and his life began a downward spiral – he squandered his wealth in wild living, out of need he was hired to feed pigs, stooping so low as to eat their food. And the saddest part? No one gave him any help. Do you think in his wildest imagination he ever thought that his decision to leave home would have this kind of consequences? I doubt it.

Lesson three is one of reality for all of us at some time. He came to his senses. There likely have been times in your own life when you realize that a decision you made was very wrong, and you come to your senses. But what does it mean when we say we come to our senses? Simply put, it means we come to an understanding that whatever the basis of our decision was, the consequences were not what we had hoped for. When I made the decision to leave my position with the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and go back to local ministry, I chose to accept a position in Kansas simply because it was in the same town as my former wife's sister. The first Sunday I sat in the pew there at that church, I came to my senses and realized I had made a terrible mistake. The experience at that church was without a doubt the darkest days of my almost 60 years of ministry. I had given up a position I loved for something else and all for the wrong reason. I can

identify with the lost son when he thought carefully about his decision and recalled his past, then knew he had made a terrible mistake. Coming to our senses means we realize our remorse and our mistake.

Lesson four highlights the need to reconcile or make amends for the hurtful decisions we have made. The lost son was reminded of how good his life was at home with his father and wanted to make amends. The most tender part of this parable is when the son is willing to become a hired servant for his father and surrender his relationship as son just to make amends. Realizing his bad choice, he got up and went back home to his father. Does your heart feel touched when we read the line, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your hired servants.”? The most touching part of this entire passage for me is when the lost son confesses to his father and asks for his forgiveness. Having recognized what his bad choice had done to him and to his father, he sought to reconcile even to the point of stepping down from family to become a servant.

Lesson five has great significance for not only the lost son, but for you and me. While returning to his father’s home, he was still far away when his father saw him and ran to meet him. There are fewer scriptures that impress me with the sheer joy of how God sees and knows what we have done and yet will run to meet us and take us back – to welcome us home. Like this father did to his son – he threw his arms around him and kissed him – God does that for us when we confess our poor choices and seek to return to his parenting us. And even when the lost son

sought to give up his role in the family, his father sought only to restore him to his place. Bring a robe, put sandals on his feet, put a ring on his finger, let's have a feast and celebrate he told his servant. That of course is figuratively speaking how God welcomes us back to a closer relationship with him when we have wandered off on our own and realize our mistake, then come home to Jesus.

The last lesson I have gained from this parable is perhaps the hardest. What is the significance of the older brother who pitches a fit when the father welcomes the son home? Likely, when we have made bad choices and realize the consequences, there are those who have been caught in the cycle of circumstances who might either be hurt or angered. That was certainly my experience in the church in Kansas. Not only did that wrong decision have a very sad and lasting effect on my family, it also had a negative effect on many at the Sunday School Board who saw me as one who abandoned the significant work I had begun, but it also affected the members of the Kansas church who were angry that I had come and didn't want to be there.

But there is a bright side to the story of the lost son just as there are probably bright sides to bad choices you or I have made. The bright side? The father's words of forgiveness and restoration. "We have to celebrate and be glad because he was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found." There can be no brighter outcome to our bad decisions than to experience this kind of forgiveness and love. Let me leave you with this message – regardless of your choices or the consequences, God is there to walk through that life experience with you. You will never have to make that

journey alone. Have you ever been “the lost child”? In Christ, we might have been lost, but in reconciliation we will always be found. Not a bad lesson to learn, is it?