

The Parables of Mercy - Luke 15:1-32

The fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel is among the most beautiful in the New Testament. What is on display is the compassion of Jesus Christ for sinners as demonstrated by the three parables in this chapter. Generally known as the "parables of mercy", these parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the compassionate father – follow each other without interruption. However, it is appropriate to distinguish the first two from the third because the third is much more developed insofar as it has different potential endings. In addition, while the first two parables end with a celebration, the third leaves us holding our breath. We are not told if the older brother decides to participate in the feast for the return of the younger brother or if he goes on his way.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

***Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*(Lk. 15:1-10)**

1. The Different Categories of Sinners

In Jesus' time four categories of sinners could be distinguished, so the conventional thinking went, according to physical, racial, social, and moral characteristics. It appears that Jesus had relationships with people in all four categories.

The first category of sinners can be referred to as "physical" due to the concept that any physical handicap is linked to sin. Sicknesses were seen as consequences of sin and not as natural conditions. When Jesus heals a man who was blind from birth, his disciples ask him if the blindness is due to the blind man's sin or to the sin of his parents (see Jn. 9:1-2). In addition to the idea of a connection between sin and sickness, the idea was widespread in the Palestinian population at the time that only God could remit sin, so whatever miracle occurred had to be compensated for with purification in the Temple. Jesus claims the right to cleanse from sin, as in the case of the paralytic who is lowered through the roof (Mk.2:3-12). His forgiving of sin is seen as a blasphemy that scandalizes those present.

The second category of sinners was based on race. Foreigners were considered sinners because they did not observe the Law according to Jewish traditions. The Samaritan and the Gentiles living in Palestine belong in this category. Submission to the Law of Moses allowed them to be freed from that kind of sin. On the basis of race, Gentiles were not allowed

to enter the temple in Jerusalem and were obligated to respect its holy boundaries under pain of stoning if they defiled the sacred place.

In addition to a racial significance for word “sinner”, there was a social significance that applied to the tax collectors, or publicans, who contracted to collect the taxes owed to the imperial power. Unlike moneylenders, the publicans made their living by extorting more money than was owed and keeping the difference. Among his disciples Jesus chooses Levi, son of Alphaeus, whom he invites to follow him while he is working at the tax office (see Mk.2:14). To underscore the restoration of this group of sinners, Jesus tells the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in the Temple (Lk.18:9-14), which will be discussed later.

The last category of sinners was moral and included usurers and prostitutes. It is assumed that the woman who washes Jesus’ feet in Simon’s house is that kind of sinner. Another example would be the Samaritan woman Jesus stops to speak to at the well who has had five husbands and lives with a man who is not her husband (see Jn.4:7-30).

Jesus maintains he is sent to heal the wounds of all sinners, and no one is excluded. Because of the people he spends time with, however, he is accused of being a sinner himself (see Jn.9:24). But his miracles prove that accusation is false since a sinner cannot perform the miracles he does. The parables help explain the reasons that lead him to be with sinners.

2. The Shepherd and the Rescued Sheep

Jesus’ parable is paradoxical! We see a shepherd with a hundred sheep who has lost one. He leaves the rest of the ninety-nine sheep in the desert and goes in search of the missing sheep. Once he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders, goes home, calls his friends together, and asks them to rejoice with him. The paradox is found in the question that Jesus asks to describe the shepherd’s choice. In terms of who would make such a choice, no one would really leave ninety-nine sheep in the desert to look for a missing one because he would risk losing the ninety-nine in the desert without any assurance of finding the missing one.

The paradoxical manner in which the shepherd acts explains Jesus’ approach: those who think (or assume) they are without sin are like the ninety-nine sheep left alone by themselves without a shepherd. There is a risk for the ninety-nine sheep in the desert as well as for the missing sheep but with the substantial difference that the lost sheep needs to be rescued while the others might think they are safe.

The joy at the end of the parables is true to life. Finding a lost sheep is the joy of a shepherd ... and of God who rejoices more over a converted sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not (or deceive themselves that they do not) need conversion. The way Jesus sees conversion is thought-provoking: **it is not the fruit of the one who converts but the fruit of the action of God who seeks the one who is lost. Conversion is always the action of grace given by the One who puts the lost sheep on his shoulders and goes home. And since conversion originates from grace, it needs to be shared. The Pharisees and the scribes have a choice. They can share the joy of conversion given to the publicans and sinners, or they can object to it, falling into the presumption of being safe in the desert, like a flock that is actually in harm’s way because it has no shepherd.**

The human component of conversion is important, especially since people are not compliant like sheep. Nevertheless, the parable is not presenting a moral either about the ninety-nine sheep or the rescued sheep. In other words, a person does not need to be lost in order to be found, nor does being left in the desert mean a person is not being sought by God. All

the actions are on the part of the shepherd, not the sheep. The parable of the lost coin is added next to highlight the divine origin of conversion.

3. The Housewife and the Recovered Lost coin.

A housewife who loses a coin and does everything she can to find it makes the situation of the shepherd and his sheep that somewhat hard to imagine more plausible. Once the coin is found the woman gathers her friends and neighbors and asks them to rejoice with her because she has found the lost coin. The conclusion of the parable is analogous to the one about the lost sheep: there is joy before the angels of God for a single sinner who repents. On a first reading, it seems that the content of the two parables are very similar. The hundred sheep correspond to the ten coins, while the lost sheep parallels the lost coin. **But the attention in this parable is actually focused on the commitment of the woman to find the lost coin that is worth much less than a sheep. In Jesus' time a drachma was worth about one denarii, one day's worth of work.**

Despite the minimal value of the coin, the housewife commits herself wholeheartedly to finding it. The parable does not specify the social status of the woman, but in this case poverty could explain such intense effort at finding the missing coin. Instead the focus is on her meticulous search for the lost coin and the shared joy in finding it. Her dedication and joy, and not the nominal value of the coin, is what actually confers real value on the coin.

A coin is inanimate, which underscores even more that conversion is not conceived of as a human response but as an action of grace by God. This short parable of mercy does not link the lost coin to the other coins, unlike the lost sheep that has a connection to the ninety-nine. The housewife searches for the individual coin because of the value it has for her and not because it is similar to the other drachmas. If there were only one sinner, it would be worth the trouble to look for it, find it, and rejoice.

The call for us today

The Church becomes like the merciful heavenly Father when it acts as a mother in search of a lost sheep: it does not forget the ninety-nine on the mountains but rejoices for the one that is recovered. It is easy to see how the parable of the good shepherd involves the Church and its shepherds. The little ones who cannot find a place in society acquire the right of citizenship in the Christian community. They are not only welcomed but are also sought even when there is the risk of not finding them. Jesus implies a contrast between a Church that embarks only on a path of moralism or efficiency and a Church that places the little ones at the center. If the Church exists wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, the face of Christ in the Church is the face of these little ones.

EXTREME COMPASSION

The Merciful Father (Luke 15:11-32)

With all due respect for the first two parables of mercy, a human being is different from a sheep and even more so from a coin! Jesus, very conscious of that enormous difference brings in a story now that is a work of art. This is a parable par excellence for good reason, provided, however, that we change the title: it should not be “the prodigal son” or “the good father” but the “merciful or compassionate father.” Let us reread the parable in all its richness and profundity:

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me.’ And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to make merry.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Behold, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed you command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive, he was lost, and is found.’”(Lk.15:11-31)

The Father Leaves the House Twice

Among the multiple and diverse conflicts that can occur within domestic walls, it is difficult, if not impossible, in some cultures to imagine a father who leaves his place at home to reach out to a son who has deliberately left no trace. If the usual title of “the prodigal son” proposed for the parable is inadequate, it is because the undisputed protagonist is the father who, in the way he relates to both his sons, violates the standard procedure for fair remuneration.

At the beginning of the story, the father grants the request of the younger son. No explanation is offered for why the son asks for his share of the inheritance. Is it because he is in conflict with the older son? Or because he does not share his father’s lifestyle? Or because he felt the need to have an independent life? Whatever his motivation, it is not disclosed, since the narrator is interested in the son’s hurried departure from his father’s house rather than the reason for it.

After a description of the son’s dissolute life, the scene returns to the father who acts in astonishing ways. He sees his son from afar, which indicates that he has been waiting for him ever since he left home; he experiences compassion; he runs to meet him; and he embraces and kisses him (v.20). It leaves the son little time to communicate what he had prepared to say in view of their meeting. The father interrupts him before hearing the son’s request to be treated like a hired servant and commands his servants to bring out the best robe, to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, and to kill the fatted calf for a feast. Among all the things the father does for the younger son, the decisive one, which indicates the turning point of the parable, is condensed in the phrase he “had compassion”(v.20).

The father viscerally loves the lost son with the deepest of human passions. We saw the same phrase as the turning point of the parable of the good Samaritan: “he had compassion”(Lk.10:33). The compassion of the good Samaritan for the dying man is similar to the father’s compassion for his lost son. Without compassion it is impossible to run to meet a son, embrace him, and restore his lost dignity. St. John Paul II said it well in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, where he discusses this parable: “The Father’s fidelity to himself is totally concentrated upon the humanity of the lost son, upon his dignity”(6). The father’s mercy, not his moral virtue, is at the center of the parable. His virtues are good character qualities, but mercy is an orientation that matures in the depths of one’s soul and is manifested in actions toward one’s neighbor.

His hardest test as a father is still to come. It occurs when the older brother’s way of thinking is exposed. The refusal of the older son to enter the house is dramatic; anger transfixes him at the very entrance he had crossed numerous times. So the father decides to go out of the house again to plead with him. This time the price is higher than the price paid for the younger son because the father has to undergo a rebuke that rips him apart! The older son accuses him of being stingy, of not being ready to give him a goat for a feast with his friends. A father seems to have failed in his role when he does not repay the son who is faithful to him but has the fatted calf killed for the son who had squandered his means. Anger leads the older son to distort the truth that he has known from the beginning: the father offered no resistance to the younger son’s request for his portion of the inheritance, and the major part of the family inheritance still belongs to the older son.

The father's mercy is unlimited. He could have responded that he was in charge as long as the son lived in his house. According to the rules of inheritance, he could do whatever he wanted with his goods since he was still alive! Instead, the father meets the older son on his level and encourages him to rethink his relationships. The tenderness with which he addresses the older son is immense. Even though the son never calls him "father," he calls him "son" (teknon), a word denoting an intimate relationship. The father is aware that the remaining inheritance belongs to his older son, but that is not the issue. Instead, he is preoccupied and focused on wanting to transform "this son of yours" - which is a rebuke by the older son - into "this your brother" (v.32). The deepest conversion the father is waiting for is not that of the younger son who has come home (initially because he would otherwise have died of hunger); rather it is the conversion of the older son who is incapable of recognizing his father and his brother.

As we think about and speak about a Church that goes out," we first have to see "the father who goes out" in the parable. Because of his excessive compassion for his two sons, he is not waiting for them inside the house. He runs out to meet the younger one and reaches out to the older one to flood them both with his mercy.

The Son Who Died Is Alive

The drama of the younger son is that the more he distances himself from his father, the more his situation deteriorates. After receiving his part of the inheritance, the son goes to a faraway region where he wastes his inheritance and lives a dissolute life. Since there is a herd of pigs in that faraway region, it means that he has gone beyond the borders of the holy land where raising pigs is not permitted because they are considered unclean. Therefore, taking care of pigs is the lowest level of humiliation for the younger son - to the point that he is not given any pods fed to the swine. When St. Augustine of Hippo assesses his life before conversion, he echoes the condition of the younger son: "At the time of my adolescence I strayed far away from you, and I wandered, my God. I became myself a land of misery" (Confessions, 2, 10, 18).

His destitute condition leads the younger son to come to his senses and to reflect on the situation in which he is trapped. He thinks with longing about the servants in his father's house: While he cannot nourish himself even with pods, they have bread in abundance. So he decides to go back home and ask his father to be treated like one of his hired servants to avoid dying of hunger. The younger son also comes to realize he has sinned against heaven and against his father, so he would be satisfied with being treated like a worker. What interests him initially (before he expresses repentance) is to have bread to eat; and since he does not succeed in finding any other solution, he starts walking home.

The embarrassment the son feels as he faces the father who runs to meet him, embrace him, and kiss him must be enormous. The compassion of the father is undeserved, capable not only of satisfying the son's hunger, but also of restoring his lost dignity. In all haste, without any request for explanations or counting the cost, the father has the son clothed in the best robe and has a ring put on his finger and sandals on his feet. Before seeing his father again,

this son was reduced to being a beggar; he no longer had the dignity of a son, but the indignity of caring for unclean animals that were forbidden to be eaten.

The sound of music and dancing coming from the father's house means the father has welcomed his son back into the family; he was dead and is alive; he was lost and has been found. What gives life back to the son who was dead is not repentance by itself but the enormous compassion of the father, compassion for a son who is a new creature and is beginning a new life. The father's compassion is more than just an emotion; it becomes transformed into a passion capable of birthing new life where there was death.

1. "This your brother"(v.32)

This is just once case, but in sacred Scripture firstborn or older sons do not always have a good lot in life. Although they are destined to be sons of the promise or of inheritance, they often experience the misfortune of people who are deprived of their most natural rights. We know about Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, the sons of Jacob vs. Joseph, right up to the sons of Jesse with respect to King David. The enormous paradox of the history of salvation is that the divine law of the firstborn is broken by God himself, and for a very important reason. When it comes to divine remuneration and inheritance, everything must transpire on the level of grace and not on the level of legal rights. In this parable the merciful father recognizes that the patrimony belongs to the older son, but he asks him to adjust his thinking.

The second part of the story becomes a "parable in the parable," and the older son is it protagonist. Returning from the field where he is working on behalf of his father, he hears the music and dancing, so he asks a servant and is told what is happening. The servant must have thrown gas on the fire because, with a good dose of irony, he tells him that the younger brother has returned and his father has killed the fatted calf.

The older son's fury is uncontrollable. He decides not to enter the house, and when the father comes outside to plead with him, he rails against everybody. He accuses the father of being a miser because he did not give him even a goat, and accuses his younger brother of being a degenerate who squandered his portion of the inheritance on prostitutes. At the center of this "parable-in-the-parable" we find the verb "was angry" (v.28), which expresses the exact opposite of the central verb phrase in the first part. While the father "had compassion" (v.20) and was viscerally moved for his lost son, the older brother "was angry" with his father. His rage blinds him and prevents him from seeing the good: his brother is well; he was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he is found. He can see nothing but the sin committed by his brother, which also blocks him from seeing the good that the father has kept aside for him. The wrongdoing of the younger son, which the father does not hold against him, is blurred out by the brother. It is only from the older brother that we hear the younger one had spent his inheritance on prostitutes. The older brother here sounds like the author of the Book of Sirach who advises, "Do not give yourself to harlots / lest you lose your inheritance" (9:6).

The parable does not recount either a happy or a sad conclusion concerning the older brother's ultimate choice. Was he convinced by the father to enter the house? Did he too decide to ask for his own inheritance and leave his father's house? Did he ever meet his younger brother's gaze? The parable of the merciful father is an open parable that defers

the responsibility for appropriate choices to the listeners. Will they establish relationships according to the standards of legal rights and remunerative justice? Or will they follow the meandering path of grace and mercy? If they choose the latter option, people cannot consider the father ungrateful if he applies mercy to a sinner; they need to rejoice when a sinner who was dead comes back to life.

The parables of the sheep and the drachma end on a positive note, while the parable of the merciful father ends in silence. Those who criticize Jesus for welcoming publicans and sinners and eating with them are given the responsibility to choose how to think about their relationship with God (represented by the father) and with their neighbor (represented by the younger brother).

2. Servants, Not Judges, of Mercy

A work of art can be examined from various angles, and each time new and different meanings will emerge. Few commentators of this parable stop to look at the role of the servants more closely because they are considered part of the background. However, there is actually significant tension concerning the servants in the two parts of the parable. On the one hand, the servants participate in the festive reunion of the father and the younger son, and on the other hand, one of them communicates the family news in a negative way to the older son who has just come in from the field.

The servants who participate in the encounter of the father and the younger son carry out the orders they are given: they bring out the best robe; they dress him; they put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; they kill the fatted calf and take part in the feast. The servants are also aware of the main reason for the father's many actions: the son who was dead is alive again. The servants are participating in acts of mercy, and there is no objection whatsoever to the enormous compassion of the father. They have their job to do; they clothe the younger son with his lost dignity and organize the feast. It is significant that the father does not clothe his son with his lost dignity by himself but involves his servants in sharing his mercy.

In the second part, one of the servants is questioned by the older son and only says, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound" (Lk.15:27). There is a marked contrast between the servants in the first part of the parable and the servant in the second part who reduces his master's mercy to an injustice against the older brother. This servant limits the information he gives to the killing of the calf and his brother's physical health. He does not mention the father's compassion for the son or the other activities he has taken part in except for the killing of the calf. He too is reasoning according to the logic of rewards based on merit and not on grace. The servant knows well that while the best calf is being killed for the younger son, the older son has not received a goat to celebrate with his friends. In other words, the servant seems to be saying to the older brother: "Look at the kind of father you have! Your faithful obedience is worth less than a goat while your brother's dissolution is worth the best calf." And it is the news about the calf that triggers the wrath of the older brother.

In his boundless mercy the father is alone with his older son who, along the line of the servant's viewpoint, minimizes his compassion by reducing it to the level of remuneration. In the relationship of mercy between the father and his two sons, the servants play contrasting roles. They are either servants of mercy for the restoration of the son's lost dignity and share in the joy of their master, or they judge as unjust the extreme compassion of the father for the son that was found.

