

Who is Jesus?
Storyteller
Fourth in Lenten Series

by
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-2, 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your

hired hands.””²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.’³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³² 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.””

Psalm 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

¹¹Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

The Psalm for today begins: *Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity...* That’s pretty much how the story of the Prodigal Son ends up – Happy! Perhaps better named the Parable of the Father and Two Lost Sons. Under either title, it ends on a happy note. Happy sounds of the band warming up in the background, the festive smells of the fatted calf wafting through the air, the scurry of preparations for the village neighbors and friends to arrive for a feast. Happy, we presume, is the runaway son who comes home to an unexpected welcome; the Father’s grief and anguish turned to joy. We are not sure how happy the older brother is at the end – the one who also lost himself for a while in his own self-righteousness and jealousy. We are left to imagine how the story goes for him, a change of heart perhaps after his father loves on him with the gracious reminder that the Son he forgave is also his brother; a joyful family reunion is at hand.

The Psalmist says: *Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven.* A declaration of what life with God should be. Jesus, however, does not declare, or pronounce or instruct on happiness, but instead tells a story. Jesus says - *Once upon a time...* He tells parables to help us think about the life of faith, to wrestle with what is good and true, to invite us into a life lived in the way of Jesus himself. The word, *parable*, comes from two Greek terms. *Para* means “to come along side,” and *ballein* means “to throw.” A parable is intended to be a story that comes alongside our regular understanding of the way things are meant to be and then upsets it by throwing surprises and twists and turns in our pathway.

While today’s Parable is so familiar we might initially think we know the point of it – if a point is what you’re after. But it’s actually a living story in which we are meant to wander around, trying on the shoes of each character, finding ourselves at any given moment in time assuming the role one or another.

Jesus is the Storyteller who does not coerce, but rather invites us into relationship with God, into the adventure of following Jesus himself.

Once upon a time... he says, a Sower went out to sow some seed, and some fell on the path, some fell among thorns, and some fell in good soil. *Once upon a time...* a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped and beat him, leaving him half dead... now by chance a priest and a Levite passed by on the other side, but a Samaritan saw him and was moved to pity... *Once upon a time...* a rich man produced abundantly, and thought to himself, what shall I do? I will build bigger barns to hold crops laid up for many years, but that night his life was taken from him. *Once upon a time* a woman lost a coin, and turned her whole house upside down looking for it.

Now, Jesus will, upon occasion, be very direct. He gives us the precise words for prayer, for example, and admonishes us to love our enemies, to give to the poor, and forgive one another. But more often than not, when somebody in the crowd shouts out a big question like: Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Or Who is my neighbor? Or - Why do you welcome sinners and eat with them? Jesus says, *Once upon a time ...* You can surmise that the Parable of the Father and Two Lost Sons is a story about God's radical willingness to forgive and God's unconditional love. It is that. But it's never only that.

As I heard Frederick Buechner say one time, "If we think the purpose of Jesus' stories is essentially to make a point like a moral at the end of a fable, then the inevitable conclusion is that once you get the point, you can throw the story itself away like the rind of an orange when you squeeze the juice out of it. Is that true? Can we extract the point of these parables and frame them on the living room wall for a perpetual edification? Or is the story itself the point and the truth of the story? Isn't the point of Jesus' stories that they point to the truth, the truth about you and me and our stories?"¹

The truth of Jesus' stories is we live them out every day of our lives. They are as complicated and sad and joyful as we ourselves are complicated and sad and joyful. Simply put, the stories Jesus told around the hill country of Galilee are essentially the stories Jesus still tells about us. We can try to put them in context and explain away every detail, but at the end of the day, we are invited to find ourselves inside of them. We are the lost and the found, the jealous and resentful, the forgiving and grateful; we are the generous who go beyond what is required to help; and we are also the ones in need of those outstretched arms of love and forgiveness.

I think Jesus speaks to us in parables precisely because they are not rules, or commandments, or doctrine. Instead they are open-ended

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry*, p. 133. I heard Buechner preach this sermon before it was published in Montreat, NC, in the late 1980's.

tales that invite us to struggle with meaning, to wonder about our relationship with God and with one another, and to see the world from time to time as Jesus himself might see it. Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine says Jesus' parables are mysterious, in that parables challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known but refuse to acknowledge.² Adds historian Diana Butler Bass describing them this way: "Parables should leave us gasping, out in the doctrinal cold, and shaking with anger, awe, or surprise. Nothing is as we thought. The whole point of a parable," she concludes, "is to disturb and perplex us, shaking up what we believe to be true, all without providing an easy answer or simple moral to fall back upon."³

So, Friends, at this moment in time, in this season of Lent, in this time of crisis in our world where so many lies are accepted as truth, and so much hatred is on display, and so much tragic violence is killing and displacing people in unimaginable numbers, I think Jesus the Storyteller is saying to us: I trust you; I trust you to make sense of who you are and where you are going and what – you need to do to heal the world. I trust you, Jesus says by the stories he tells, to discern how God is moving you, loving you, forgiving you, calling you, challenging you to seek and find the lost, to bind up the broken hearted, to share your considerable resources with those in need, to witness to the living presence of Christ in your life by populating his stories, and thereby learning to walk in his ways.

There is a story about the great physicist, Albert Einstein, about whom those who have lived in or around Princeton University know

² Levine quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence*, p.43.

³ Bass, p. 45-46.

Einstein stories are legion. He was traveling once from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. When the conductor came to Einstein, he reached in his vest pocket. He could not find his ticket, so he reached in his pant pockets. It wasn't there. He looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He still couldn't find it. "The conductor said, 'Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.' Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. And as he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, 'Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are; no problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.' Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I am going." ⁴

Friends, we know who we are. We are prodigals – all of us – at some time or another. Runaways from God, trying to make it on our own, until some moment of crisis stirs our hearts to find our way back, with heaves of sorrow and guilt pressed against God's beating heart. And we are the ones who know something about sibling rivalry, inheritance disputes and jealous resentment, and what it is like to stew in our own self-righteousness. We are that elder son – the responsible one, whose resentment and jealousy get the best of us from time to time. And God comes to us saying – of course I forgave the other one; but you too are my precious child; now it is time for you to forgive your brother. Whether the younger, or the elder, we are all of us the ones who know what it is like to fall into the arms of undeserved and unexpected grace and forgiveness. We know who we are.

⁴ Camille Cook Howe, "Billy's New Suit," 2/7/21 at Georgetown Presbyterian Church.

The question before us today, is do we know where we are going?
Are we willing to follow the Storyteller into this world of hurt and
suffering and need as Jesus himself invites us to discern the way?

AMEN.