

There's an old saying that a parable is an earthy story with a heavenly meaning. If that is true- and I believe it is, then we have a whole lot of meaning coming our way this morning, right under our feet.

A core message of the gospel is that one good apple saves the barrelful; the redeeming power of good is greater than the corrupting power of evil.

That's right... the way you've usually heard that saying is that it takes just one bad apple to spoil the barrel- and that may well be true, as far as apples go; but when it comes to telling the story of the kingdom of God, Jesus turns the ways of the world upside down.

That's why in the church we talk so much about one very good person, Jesus. He is the one good apple that we follow. Following his lead brings life. It is not easy, but it is true. Like the leaven in the loaf, or the slow, steady growth of an olive tree, the goodness of God's blessing is not always apparent at first glance. Goodness might sneak up on you, and surprise you, unexpectedly. Our joy and challenge as disciples is to listen, watch, embody and share God's message of (upside-down) mercy and grace in our lives.

Now- we've all heard these three stories Jesus told, maybe more times than we can count. But as I've found this week in preparation- there's always something new in the Bible for us- always.

How you hear and understand a story can be vastly influenced by its title. Generally, we put these three parables under the heading "Parables of Lost and Found"- meaning that the responsibility (or blame) for being lost in the first place lies in the thing that was lost: the sheep, the coin, the son.

So I have wondered, what if we made a change and called the first two parables "The Shepherd Who Lost His Sheep" and "The Woman Who Lost Her Coin", might we understand them differently? Just think how you would understand it if the last parable we read was called "The Father Who Lost His Son(s)- instead of "The Prodigal Son."

Putting the emphasis on the first character in each story would redirect our attention away from any fault we might place on who is lost, a sheep, a coin or an heir, and would focus our attention on the first, main character- the 'God' role in each of the stories. Then we would see the

wonder of change in the story, the sadness of loss to the joy of finding; from separation to glad reunion. One good apple returns to complete the barrel and makes it whole.

There are some other key things in common in each of these stories. Luke sets this scene as Jesus is speaking to ‘tax collectors’ and sinners. So these words are not to the elite, but to the average person, who- for whatever reason at this point, is drawn to hear Jesus talk. (He wasn’t just already a famous healer, but apparently a renowned teacher, as well.) -- Jesus casts the central characters in each of these stories as well-off people, likely with far more money than his average audience. None of these folks had 100 sheep; 10 drachmas was a considerable sum of money, far more than a week’s average pay, and a Father who could afford to pre-pay his son’s inheritance was a wealthy landowner, not a peasant merchant or worker, as Jesus’ usual audience likely was.

If you’re a numbers person, then a look at the percentages is also interesting. The ratio of found to lost goes from 99/1 down to 9/1, and then 1/1 or, perhaps 0/2.

The key plot change in each of these stories is something unexpectedly gone missing. Perhaps the first two parables could be described under the heading- ‘Stories of the Initially Oblivious Owners.’ Yet the takeaway of each of these stories was once summed up to me very nicely by a child, in a response in a children’s sermon that I did years back: “if you go away from God for a while, when you come back, God rejoices.” This cycle is then completed three times over; loss, search, completion, joy. A complete barrel full.

In the end there is no resentment, no hard feelings, no imputed guilt, just welcome and celebration. It is not just the discovery of good news, but the realization of even better news, that completes each story.

It is strangely ironic that all three parables are remembered in negative terms; rather than finding joy in the found sheep, the found coin, the found son. It is very strange indeed, because all three stories have happy endings.

Perhaps the particular power of the parable of the prodigal is that you and I are in this story, somewhere. We are one of the apples; which one depends on the lives we live.

To be sure, Jesus’ first audience was given plenty of clues to draw them in to the initial plot-line, only to meet an unexpected twist, not just once, but twice over again, particularly with this third tale.

All those familiar with the stories of the Bible knew what they were listening for when they heard the cue for the younger son. They knew this would be the one who would make good on God's promises, unlike the older brother. Instead of surly Cain, Abel would please his father, Jacob would be favored more than Esau, and David, by far the youngest- would be honored over all his older brothers. So when this youngest son turns out to be an irresponsible, self-indulgent adventurer, Jesus' audience is thrown for a loop. After all of his cavorting away from home, the surprise isn't really so much that the Father is overjoyed to welcome his younger son back- as much as shock at witnessing the sheer resentment and barely suppressed hostility the older brother expresses. The contrast between the Father's joy and the older brother's resentment can hardly be more extreme. (It's a sure sign of an apple going bad.)

Why do people who are included resent others coming in the same door, being accepted even without the proper credentials? This may well be the question for us, even deeper than being lost in the first place.

There can be a seed of jealousy within us that may well be very human, but just the same, stunts our growth as Christ-like disciples. Here's a story for you to illustrate.

An old, old Rabbinic tale tells of the good fortune of a hard-working farmer. An angel of the Lord appeared to the farmer and granted three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to the neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing the good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately a hundred cattle appeared, and the farmer was overjoyed until discovering the neighbor had two hundred.

So the farmer wished for a hundred acres of land, and again was filled with joy until seeing the neighbor had two hundred acres.

Rather than celebrating God's goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because the neighbor had received more.

Finally, the farmer stated a third wish: that God ... strike the farmer blind in one eye. And God wept.

In his book, The Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri Nouwen writes that 'One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness, and even more significant, to see another receive forgiveness who we deem undeserving. There is something in us humans that keeps us clinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offer us a completely new beginning. Even more so, we wish God would mete out just punishments,

according to our reckoning. Sometimes it seems as though we want to prove to God that our darkness is too great to overcome, that we can go it alone. While God wants to restore us to the full dignity of a beloved child, we keep insisting that we can manage on our own, while we continue to want to have a say in the fate of another person.

The underlying question for us in Jesus' parable is this: Do we truly want to be restored to the full responsibility of being a beloved child of God? Do we truly want to be so totally forgiven that a new way of living becomes possible?

Do we trust ourselves to live into such a radical reclamation?

Unlike a fairy tale, this parable of the prodigal provides no happy ending. Instead, it leaves us face to face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not to trust in God's all-forgiving love, for ourselves and others. We ourselves are the only ones who can make that choice.

Receiving forgiveness requires a complete willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring and renewing, and allowing us to forgive others as well. It can be a deeper process than you think.

The gospels affirm righteousness by association. The closer we follow Jesus, the better off we are.

If it is true that a core message of the gospel is that one good apple saves the barrel, that the redeeming power of good is greater than the corrupting power of evil, maybe that process can begin on the inside, and we can let God to God's work, even in us today. Amen.