

I. Advanced Organizer

A. What if something didn't have to mean what you always thought it meant?

1. One of my favorite movies growing up was the 1980s romantic comedy *The Princess Bride*. In that movie, there are two characters who find themselves working together. One of them is the Sicilian boss Vizzini, who thinks of himself as a brilliant mastermind, smart than Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. **Vizzini has this word he drops often to describe potential events: "inconceivable"**. But as Vizzini and his crew are pursued by the Dread Pirate Roberts, their nemesis keeps surprising them doing the thing that Vizzini had dismissed as "inconceivable". Finally, one of the men working with him, Inigo Montoya, turns to Vizzini and says: "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." Vizzini was clearly use the word like a synonym of "impossible" - something so out there that it couldn't even be thought of, it couldn't be conceived, let alone accomplished. And yet as the Dread Pirate Roberts showed them each time, his victories were both conceivable and possible.
 2. Decades after the film came out, this line has resonated in pop-culture and is now a popular meme, with people calling each other out online for using words incorrectly. Images of Inigo Montoya pop up with captions like **"literally...I do not think it means what you think it means."**
 3. Now many of us have probably had the experience of hearing a word used in conversation or reading it in a book that we were unfamiliar with, and without much conscience thought, our brain did the work of filling in what the meaning must be. Sometimes the meaning we filled in was correct. But other times, we can find ourselves believing a word means something that it doesn't just because of the context in which we heard it. **Sometimes things don't mean what we think they mean.**
- B. This is the second Sunday in a teaching series I started a couple of weeks ago that I'm calling **"A Story-Shaped Faith"**. In this series we're looking at a few of the famous kind of stories that Jesus liked to tell, and I'm inviting us to consider how those stories were intended to shape the spirituality of the folks Jesus was speaking to, and beyond that, how they might shape our own.
- C. Today we're going to take a look at a story that is very famous. Whether we've spent a lot of time in church or not, we likely have heard this story. We may have heard it preached often. And in the hearing and rehearing, likely a common way of understanding the story has been established.
1. But what if something didn't have to mean what we always thought it meant?
- D. In the ancient world, **parables were stories intended to provoke**. They were intended to impact their audience, but this generally happened through **surprise, mystery, challenge**. And knowing that leaves us with a real question to consider. If a story has a long-established, fairly unchallenged interpretation, **how can that story still function to surprise, provoke, wrestle us into new understanding?** If we're going to encounter the story in a fresh way and actually be transformed by it, we probably need to have more than one angle to view the story from. We need to be able to ask questions we didn't think to ask before. And **I think this can only come if we're open to experiencing meaning in a way that we haven't experienced before.**
- E. Today, I'm going to try to prompt us free from a fixed understanding of a famous parable by looking at the story from another, alternative angle. We'll start by reading the parable, then I'll summarize the interpretation that I think many of us may feel familiar with, and then I'll share

another interpretation that I've discovered in my study on this story; one that has challenged me to think about the story in a different way than I ever have before.

1. The point of this exercise won't be for us to determine together which view is ultimately "right" or "wrong". In this way, it's different than figuring out if you're using a word correctly. **The brilliance of a good parable is that it leaves itself open to many viable understandings that can shape our faith and provoke meaningful change. A really good story may even speak to us in different ways in different times in our lives.** My goal in focusing on two readings of a familiar story is to get us out of the boxed thinking that there has to be just one way of reading something, and invite us to consider, even if there is potent truth in our often-preached interpretation, how there may be more truths to uncover if we're willing to look again, see the familiar in a new way, and move from a sense of clarity to curiosity, from confidence to wonder.
- II. So with that introduction, let us turn to this famous parable found in Luke, chapter 15, often referred to as "The Prodigal Son":

A. 11 Then Jesus said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. 13 After a few days, the younger son gathered together all he had and left on a journey to a distant country, and there he squandered his wealth with a wild lifestyle. 14 Then after he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and worked for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He was longing to eat the carob pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have food enough to spare, but here I am dying from hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired workers."' 20 So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way from home his father saw him, and his heart went out to him; he ran and hugged his son and kissed him. 21 Then his son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Hurry! Bring the best robe, and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it! Let us eat and celebrate, 24 because this son of mine was dead, and is alive again—he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field. As he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the slaves and asked what was happening. 27 The slave replied, 'Your brother has returned, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he got his son back safe and sound.' 28 But the older son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and appealed to him, 29 but he answered his father, 'Look! These many years I have worked like a slave for you, and I never disobeyed your commands. Yet you never gave me even a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends! 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything that belongs to me is yours. 32 It was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.'"

B. Now let's consider the standard reading of the story. **Often the story is read as some sort of allegory.**

1. **The Father is seen as representative of God.** God, this reading says, is like a loving parent, always eager to celebrate and welcome back God's children; even when they've messed up really bad. God is eager to forgive and restore relationship with the child who has been separated from the Divine, has been lost to him. God even is willing to look ridiculous, running in the street, embracing the once-lost child with enthusiasm and joy.
2. **As I mentioned before, this story has classically been known as "The prodigal son".** As it happens, I think this word "prodigal" is one that many folks misunderstand because they've only heard it in reference to this parable, so they may assume that "prodigal" means someone who leaves and returns, but that's not actually the case. **The word "prodigal" refers to recklessly spending money in a foolish way;** lavishly dispensing of resources, as we see the younger son do with the inheritance he receives from his father. So in the classic allegorical interpretation, **this prodigal son represents the sinner who eventually repents.** He messed up, he was foolish and willing to terminate relationship with his family, but he saw the error of his ways and returned. As he returns to his father saying "I'm no longer worthy to be your son" he is understood to be confessing his wrong, returning in humility, with a genuine spirit of repentance. This repentant spirit is rewarded with the loving embrace of the Father, just as we are encouraged to see ourselves as experiencing the loving welcome of the Divine when we humble ourselves and return to our creator.
 - a) One of the most **famous reflections on the reading of the story came from Rembrandt.** His famous painting of the son being embraced by his father has been a source of meditation and encouragement for many Christians throughout history as they imagine themselves being embraced by their Divine Father in the same way. You may want to look it up later, it's called "The Return of the Prodigal Son." It's a beautiful image.
3. **Of course there's another character in the story** - the elder son, who the story says is out in the fields. He's not celebrating. He doesn't want to join the party. **In traditional readings, he is understood to represent the Pharisees in Jesus' days, or other religious leaders who criticized Jesus for eating with sinners.** Or in some contexts, the older brother character is generalized to represent Jewish people in the early church who may have objected to God welcoming gentiles into the family. Often today this is understood to point to the religiously scrupulous in the church - conservative Christians or Catholics or whoever a particular community imagines might be a bit grumpy and resentful that God is more gracious and openhearted to people than they are. In this reading, God is the parent encouraging these resentful members of the spiritual family that yes, they matter too, but they need to embrace the family members that have recently been recovered, rather than holding them at arm's length.
4. So that is essentially the reading I have been familiar with over decades of studying this parable. To be sure, there have been different nuances brought out in different contexts, but the overall understanding that Jesus intended this story to be an allegory for how we relate to God pretty much went unquestioned.

C. Now to be clear, **I'm not here to say this morning that this reading isn't powerful, or even that it isn't true.** I think there is much about this interpretation that rings true. I do believe the Divine is eager to receive us whenever we turn toward them with a desire to reconnect. I do think God wants to restore any ruptures in our relationships. Especially if we're feeling a lot of

shame about some way we've really screwed up, receiving the encouragement that the Divine is running towards us like this eager Father ready to embrace us is powerful, and I think it reflects something true.

1. I do wonder, though, **if parables are meant to surprise and to challenge - how surprising is the reading of this parable?** How surprising would it have been in Jesus' day?
2. It's also true that this reading, while it may have much to attest to it, **leaves a number of questions unanswered.** Perhaps these questions are all just beside the point, and not to be concerned with. Or maybe they might illuminate that our interpretation isn't the only way of looking at this story.
 - a) One question that comes up: **the story makes it seem like the younger son's request to receive his inheritance as he does is foolish and disrespectful.** Many interpreters through the centuries have even argued that the request itself is sinful, believing the young man is essentially declaring that he wishes the father dead by asking for his inheritance while the father lives. But if this is so, that the younger son is behaving badly even before he wastes the money, **what might we say about the father who accommodates the request without raising any objection?** Isn't he complicit in his son's folly as he indulges him? Isn't he as "prodigal" in giving away half of his resources as his son is once he has them? **If we follow the allegorical reading, is this how we are to understand God, as an indulgent parent who gives into our whims even when they're foolish, selfish or potentially destructive?**
 - b) **Then there's the question of the "prodigal" son's repentance. How sincere is it actually?** Upon a close reading of the story, it's not clear that any actual regret or moving of conscience prompts the younger son to return. His mind returns to home because of the emptiness of his stomach. A skeptical reader might consider that this man's father seems to have always given him what he needs. Now he's starving and out of options so perhaps it's time to go ask again. As the young man formulates a plan, the plan seems to be built on his relationship with the person he's returning to. Yes, he intends to propose being treated as a servant, but as he makes that plan he keeps repeating the language of "Father" about the one he is addressing. "I'll go to him and say 'Father'..." he says, as if he seems to hope that his special relationship with the father will carry more weight with him than his actual plea to be a servant. Perhaps it's just a manipulation.
 - c) **Then there's the statement, "I have sinned against heaven and against you."** Smart students of the Jewish torah like Jesus and many of his listeners will recognize the resonance of this statement with their ancient history and it isn't a good one. These are an echo of the words Pharaoh used when he was trying to convince Moses to relent and call off the plagues. In that story it was clear that despite the claim, there was no genuine change of heart in the person who spoke the words. Pharaoh said "I have sinned" because it was in his interest to do so, he wanted the locusts gone. **It wasn't a sincere expression of contrition. Jesus' listeners might wonder if the same is true for this young son.** Has the son really had a change of heart, or is this just another con, an attempt to get more out of dad by playing on his heart strings? The story doesn't really make it clear.
 - d) And then there's **the problem of the older brother.** The traditional reading looks at him pretty unsympathetically, usually connecting him with figures within Judaism. **But as Amy-Jill Levine, who is herself a Jewish New Testament scholar, points out,**

these readings have tended to rely on anti-semitic tropes rather than a real understanding of Jewish culture and thought.

(1) They've often relied on shallow Christian understandings that insist that the Jews of Jesus' day were only concerned about earning God's approval through good deeds. This stereotype also insists that Jews did not believe that God could welcome those who have lived in ways that were considered sinful.

(2) But this idea that Jewish people did not believe that God cared about or was eager to welcome repentant sinners is not what we see in the Hebrew Bible - throughout the Hebrew Bible there are stories of repentance and the prophets themselves were sent to call people to that kind of return to the Divine. To be sure, judgment of others and a desire to want to control the Divine will or limit Divine grace because of our own challenge with grace is a universal issue across spiritual traditions. This may be part of what Jesus was pointing to in telling this parable, but **we have to be careful that we don't allow our own biases to generalize this tendency and simply project it onto whoever it is we see as judgmental in defense of ourselves.**

3. **Now there is of course a reason that Christians have so often opted for this common interpretation of the prodigal son parable.** Luke is the author of the gospel in which this story appears, and he seems to set up this interpretation with his introductory comment.

a) At the beginning of chapter 15, Luke begins the section that will include our parable this way:

(1) Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear him. 2 But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

(2) Then Luke tells us that Jesus told three parables, all related to something being lost, found, and celebrated - one sheep out of a hundred that the shepherd goes to find, one coin out of ten that a woman searches her home for, and one son.

b) By arranging these parables this way and introducing them as he does, **many Christians believe Luke is inviting us to read the parables as being about repentant sinners being welcomed back into the fold.**

c) But if parables are meant to have multiple meanings, is it possible that Luke himself, presenting the parables this way, might have limited their scope? I'm not trying to say Luke was wrong, but maybe his interpretation isn't the only one to consider. **What if we put Luke's reasoning aside and considered our story, and perhaps the two before it, from another point of view?**

D. Again, I'm going to invite us to **consider the work of Amy-Jill Levine, and her alternative reading of the parable.** Let me summarize that for us now:

1. In the traditional reading, we assume the father is meant to represent God, and we also assume that we are supposed to connect with one of the brothers - either the prodigal who returns as a supposedly repentant sinner or the judgmental older brother who stands outside the party pouting. **But what if the father isn't meant to be an allegory for God?** What if the father in the story, is just a fictional father? And further, **what if he is the one we're supposed to consider relating to?**

a) The story of the prodigal son does seem to work with the two short parables that appear in Luke just before it. There is a lost sheep, there is a lost coin, there is a lost son. But in each of those others stories, the person the storyteller is inviting us to connect with is the person who has lost something. Jesus makes this explicit the way

he asks, “Which one of you, if he has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go look for the one that is lost until he finds it?”

- (1) Now in this case, he’s not actually asking them to imagine what God would do, **he’s asking them to imagine themselves in that scenario**. If you lost a sheep, wouldn’t you go after it he’s saying. And surprisingly, he asks them a question to which most of them would probably say, “not me” - I wouldn’t leave my 99 sheep unprotected to go find one that wandered off. That’s a surprising, rhetorical challenge to the listener to think about whether or not they would or should do that, but **the listener is primarily invited to consider and connect with the shepherd, not the sheep**.
 - (2) The same thing follows with the woman and her coin. “What woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search thoroughly until she finds it?” **The audience isn’t asked to imagine being the coin; they’re asked to imagine being the woman who’s lost it**.
- b) So we have three stories Jesus is telling about someone suffering a loss and then celebrating upon finding the thing that has been lost. In the first two, Jesus is inviting his listeners to connect with that person who has experienced the loss and then celebrated recovery. **Perhaps as he tells this third story, he means for us to make a similar connection**.
2. So if we are drawn to consider the father as the character we connect with, **what might we notice about his journey?**
- a) As I’ve already alluded to, one way of seeing the father is to view him as a **rather indulgent parent**, one who is himself a “prodigal”, giving away half his fortune to his younger son, bringing suffering to himself and his household as he enables this child’s foolishness.
 - b) After indulging his youngest son, and watching him run off with half his fortune, **the father grieves the loss of him**. One might think of Jacob who indulges his favorite son Joseph and then is tortured by the loss of him. This father has his eyes on the horizon, ever looking for the young man who has left him and, so when the son does approach, Dad sees him coming from far off, and eagerly runs to him in the road. He throws his arms around the young man who has returned to him, unconcerned with what motives brought the son back. He’s just ecstatic to celebrate, like the shepherd with the sheep or the woman with the coin. What has been lost has been found.
 - c) But in all of this playing out, **something else has gone missing**. The father throws a feast but forgets to extend a pretty important invitation. This is a father not of one son, but of two. And as the father begins to celebrate the return of the younger, he doesn’t even think to invite his older child. Instead, he lets him keep working out in the fields while everyone else parties.
 - d) **It’s only upon hearing that the older son is angry, the the father even acknowledges him**. The son’s anger is pretty understandable. Not only has Dad given half of everything to his brother, he’s pined for him throughout his brother’s absence but hasn’t seemed to spend much energy on the son who stayed behind. His father didn’t even think to invite him to the party. The older son doesn’t feel valued or included in this family. You can hear it in the way he speaks of his brother with distance. “This son of yours” he calls him. The Father is desperate to renew their family connections, speaking to the eldest and encouraging hm to acknowledge the younger

as his brother. The story is left open to us. We don't know if the father convinces the older son to join the party, or if the family remains separated, unable to find one another again.

- e) From this point of view, we have another story about losing and finding, but this one is unique. The father in our story thought he had one lost son, but the son who has been with him all along, is lost in his own way. **He may have been physically present, but there has been a relational loss.**
 - f) For Amy Jill-Levine, "The Prodigal Son" is the wrong name for this parable; it must too much focus on that character. "The Lost Son" would be a better title, and with it the challenge for us to consider: **which son is indeed lost?**
3. This unique reading of the story doesn't enforce simple truths we likely already know: that God welcomes us when we mess up and God invites us to welcome our other spiritual family members. This reading provokes us with a personal challenge. **The challenge is to consider where we might be like the shepherd, or the woman, or the father. How aware are we of what we have and what we may have lost?** Do we notice the one missing among the ninety-nine? Do we notice the one coin missing among the ten? Do we notice the one missing among the two? Or perhaps the two missing, each in their own way? Where might we do well to look again at our relationships and consider where there may be loss that we haven't noticed? What might finding and celebrating look like in those places? And can we do the work of mending when ruptures have taken place?
- E. One story, two very different readings. Each of them resonate with different layers of meaning that may move us in different ways. Again, I don't think the point is to call one right and one wrong, but simply to ask how might Jesus be speaking to us through this story today?
- 1. Here in Haven, I think the best lessons of the first reading are ones this community has been trying to take to heart. We are not perfect by any measure, but **we strive to be community where all can be welcomed into the family, where all of us can be celebrated, whatever our history is, and where we invite folks to lay down their judgments of one another and be community together with God in the midst.** That's the heart of the opening prayer we pray each week. We believe that message; we're already trying to live it as we seek to create Haven for all.
 - 2. The lessons of the second reading feel more challenging to me personally, and potentially to us as a community. While we throw our party, eager to welcome those we see as the lost being found, who might we be missing? Who might we have taken for granted? Who might be lost to us, that we haven't even noticed? Who in our families? Who in our communities? Who in our church? What would it mean for us to search for what's missing? How might the lost be found?
- F. The roughly six-week period leading up to Easter begins in early March, and this year, throughout Lent we're going to be continuing our exploration of the parables, but as we do, we'll be inviting us to consider practices we can all engage together that help embody some of the lessons these stories call us into. All of them, I hope will be a part of us enacting in deeper ways what it means to be connected to others around us and to embody the Divine care for others that I think Jesus calls us to embody. **All of them, I hope will help us to enter into that work of searching and noticing whatever we have lost relationally, that it too may have an opportunity to be found.**
- G. So as we end I want to pray for us, and invite the Spirit to stir in us imagination not only for how to hear the story, but how we might allow it to shape our faith today and going forward. Will you pray with me?

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. How has this story connected with you in the past? How does the new reading Leah presented change your perspective?
2. Do you have experiences of discovering some way in which a relationship was “lost” that you may not have noticed? Or have you been on the receiving end of a missed loss?
3. Do you see the story in a way that’s different from the two interpretations shared? How so?