



Week 4 - Persistence

Day 1- Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7/Matthew 18:12-14) and Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)

Luke 15:1-7 All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

Matthew 18:12-14 What do you think? If someone had one hundred sheep and one of them wandered off, wouldn't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillsides and go in search for the one that wandered off? If he finds it, I assure you that he is happier about having that one sheep than about the ninety-nine who didn't wander off. In the same way, my Father who is in heaven doesn't want to lose one of these little ones.

Luke 15:8-10 Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.

Understanding the Passage:

This week, we're talking about parables of Persistence. This persistence goes three directions: from God to us (God pursues us when we go astray), from us to us (we pursue the least and the lost), and from us to God (we pursue God in fervent, unyielding prayer). We're starting today with persistence of the first kind, from God to us.

Have you ever lost something so valuable or sentimental that you tore apart your house looking for it? I was travelling with my wife's family, we were staying in a hotel, and my mother-in-law couldn't find her bracelet. The bracelet had been an anniversary gift from her husband ten years before. We came just short of destroying that hotel room looking for the bracelet. The value of the bracelet (not really material value, but sentimental value) was worth so much more than the value of anything else in the room, even the stuff we brought with us, that it didn't make sense *not* to turn the place upside down. And when she found the bracelet under the bed, she got on her knees and thanked God. We were supposed to check out of the hotel within the hour. The bracelet would have been lost forever.

The parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin share three critical themes. First, the value of the thing that was lost is so high it doesn't make sense *not* to leave behind the flock or tear apart the house looking for that thing. The flock will have to take care of itself. The house will have to be dirty for a while. That thing is too valuable to remain lost.

Second, there's a sense of urgency. The sheep is in danger; it must be found now. The coin, for whatever reason, must be found before dawn. Maybe the woman needs it to pay the bills. Maybe she owes someone money.

Third, the community celebrates when the lost are found. The shepherd throws a party. The woman wakes up the neighbors and invites them over. When the lost are found, the celebration on earth must match the celebration in heaven.

So it is with God. These parables mean that God thinks too highly of us *not* to kick down heaven's door looking for us. God will search for us "until" God finds us (Luke 15:4, 8). God won't give up; it's only a matter of time before God finds us. God feels a sense of urgency, too. God has a deadline to meet. God celebrates when we allow ourselves to be found.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Who in your life has gone missing? Who in your church has gone missing?
2. When have you felt a sense of urgency to find something or someone? Do you believe God feels that way about you?
3. What would it look like to celebrate when the least and the lost allow themselves to be found?

Day 2- Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24)

A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands."' So he got up and went to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Understanding the Passage:

Today and tomorrow, we're looking at the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Today we're focusing on the younger brother, the one who ran away but came back. Tomorrow we'll focus on the older brother, the one who stayed but felt rejected.

The younger brother demands his inheritance in advance. According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the younger brother is technically owed one-third of the father's estate (the oldest son receives a double-share, and there are two sons in the story, so the older brother gets two-thirds and the younger one-third). So when the younger brother leaves the father, he's walking away with a third of the father's life savings.

The younger brother spends it all. He's penniless. But he's also a victim of a bad economy. The story says, "a severe famine took place throughout that country" (v. 14). There's a food shortage, and food shortage in any culture means high prices and low wages. Wherever the man is, that country is in a great recession. So the younger brother's poverty is a product of his poor decisions *and* his environment. It's not entirely his fault.

He takes the only job he can find: he feeds pigs. Pigs were ritually unclean animals. Just being near a pig rendered you unfit to step foot in a Jewish town. The younger brother cannot sink any lower. He's hit rock bottom.

Then the story says, “he came to himself” (v. 17). The parable hinges on this verse. He realizes that his father would gladly have him back, if not as a son, then at least as a hired hand. If he can make it home, he’ll have a place to stay and food to eat. It’s important to see that what triggers this coming to himself is his memory of the father’s character. He remembers his father as loving and generous, even to the hired hands who have more than enough to eat from the father’s table. It’s not the younger brother’s sin that convicts him; it’s the father’s heart that convicts him – the father’s loving and generous character.

The father sees his son from a distance and runs to meet him. The son has a speech prepared, but the father doesn’t let him finish. He won’t let his son testify to his guilt and shame. The father doesn’t see guilt and shame; he only sees his son. The father puts his signet ring on the son’s finger (the signet ring is like a credit card: it means the son can make purchases in his father’s name!). The father throws the best robe he owns on his boy’s shoulders, and prepares the best meal he can afford. It’s time to celebrate.

Maybe the best name for this story is the parable of the Prodigal God. Prodigal means extravagant, bordering on wasteful. The father is more prodigal than the son. The father is more extravagant with his mercy than the son is with his money. It’s the father who gives away his life’s savings, his credit card, his best clothes, and his best food. No matter how much we sin, no matter how much we waste our life, God can outmatch us in love and grace. God’s mercy is always more than our efforts to waste it.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Who in your life has hit rock bottom? Who is reaching out to them?
2. When have you felt the extravagant, bordering on wasteful love of God?
3. Do you need to come home to the Father’s love? What’s holding you back?

Day 3- Prodigal Son (Luke 15:25-32)

Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’

Understanding the Passage:

You can picture a young man in overalls and mud-caked boots coming in from the fields after a long day’s work. He’s sweaty. He’s tired. He lays a shovel in its place in the shed. The sun is setting. All should be quiet at home, and his mother should be setting the table for a quiet meal. But something’s different. There’s music coming from the house, and servants are pouring in and out with trays of food. He can smell the fatted calf in the barbeque pit. He picks up the pace and yells for his father, “What’s the meaning of this?”

The elder brother refuses to go in the house. We’re not told if he ever goes in the house. Maybe he runs away, just like his younger brother. All we know is the tables have turned: the younger brother, who for years had been the outsider looking in, is now the insider; and the elder brother, who had always been the insider, is now the outsider looking in. The dynamics of the family system have changed. How will the elder brother respond?

The elder brother’s chief complaint is that he has never disobeyed a single command of the father, yet the father has never celebrated him. He feels spurned. He feels rejected. He feels not wanted in the home he helped to build. In his anger, he accuses the younger brother of something he didn’t do. He says the younger brother wasted his inheritance on prostitutes, but we’re never told that. The elder brother has lowered himself to lying. Like the younger brother in the pig pen, he cannot sink any lower.

The elder brother is supposed to represent all of us in the church who never left, who never wandered far from home, who followed the rules and did everything we were supposed to do, but now the church is paying more attention and focusing more resources on these new people who never cared about God before, so why should they matter now? Why should we celebrate these new people when we're the ones who built the church? Why should they matter more than us? Shouldn't our years of service count more than their moment of repentance?

But the elder brother has lost what the younger brother has found: the heart of the father. The father's love is unconditional and shows no partiality. A lifetime of service does not change how God feels about you. A lifetime of wasting your life does not change how God feels about you. God loves you. Period. God just wants you home. In going lost, the younger brother found the father's heart. Now the elder brother is lost. Will he ever come home?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Are you the younger brother who got lost and now is found? Or are you the elder brother who never went astray?
2. When have you felt resentful of people who didn't put in the time or effort, but now they're the ones getting all the attention?
3. Do you feel like you need to earn God's love? What work or service to God do you need to release so you can feel the unconditional love of God?

Day 4 – Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-13)

He also said to them, "Imagine that one of you has a friend and you go to that friend in the middle of the night. Imagine saying, 'Friend, loan me three loaves of bread because a friend of mine on a journey has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.' Imagine further that he answers from within the house, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up to give you anything.' I assure you, even if he wouldn't get up and help because of his friendship, he will get up and give his friend whatever he needs because of his friend's brashness. And I tell you: Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened.

"Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Understanding the Passage:

We're looking at parables of Persistence this week, and now we turn our attention from God's pursuit of us to our pursuit of God.

In this passage, Jesus is speaking directly to the disciples and teaching them about the nature and power of prayer. He has just introduced the Lord's Prayer (11:1-4), and you can almost hear the disciples saying, "so does this prayer stuff really work? Does prayer guarantee that God will give us what we asked for? Is prayer like a contract that God has to obey? What does prayer actually *do*? The Lord's Prayer is a model for all prayer, so now that we know the words we're supposed to say, what can we expect will happen?"

First, we can expect God to reward our persistence. In the parable, it's not the neighbor's request of bread that is honored; it's his persistence in requesting bread that is honored. So does God answer prayer, or does God answer our persistence in prayer? The answer is: yes, both. God will always answer our prayers, our prayers never fall on deaf ears; *and* sometimes God answers our persistence in prayer more than the prayer itself. It's the persistence that draws us closer to God. The more persistent we are in prayer, the stronger our relationship with God will be. This parable teaches us the real purpose of prayer: it's to make the God-human relationship as strong as possible. What is prayer? Prayer is pursuit of God.

Second, we can expect God to satisfy our needs. In the parable, the neighbor with the three loaves of bread finally gets up and gives his friend "whatever he needs" (literally, "as much as he needs"). The language of "needs" is intentional;

it's not whatever the friend wants or desires. When we pray, we can count on God giving us *at least* what we need. One of the unspoken challenges of the parable is to ask ourselves, "How much do we really need? How much is enough?"

Third, we can expect God to do no harm. Who would give their child a snake when they asked for a fish? Or a scorpion if they asked for an egg? What the snake and the scorpion have in common is they would do great harm to the child. What parent would knowingly harm their child? If any parent intended harm for their child, we'd call that parent evil and dangerous. So it is with God. God never intends harm to come to any of God's children. Whatever God's will is, it does no harm. When we go to God in prayer, we do so knowing that we may not receive exactly what we asked for, yet at the same time, knowing that whatever we receive can only do us good.

Fourth, we can expect the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit that will work in and through us as we offer our prayers to God. Prayer doesn't change God, but God uses prayer to change us. How? The Holy Spirit.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How is your prayer life? Is prayer a habit or a chore? Is prayer second nature to you or does it feel forced?
2. When has it felt like God didn't answer your prayers? Why did it feel that way?
3. When has it felt like God did answer your prayers?

Day 5 – Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary.' For a while he refused but finally said to himself, I don't fear God or respect people, but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming here and embarrassing me." The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?"

Understanding the Passage:

Another way of translating verse 5 is: "yet because she keeps giving me trouble, I will vindicate her, so that in the end she doesn't punch me in the face." The word for "embarrassing" is *hypopiazē*, which literally means "under the eye," and was used as slang for giving someone a black eye. It could also refer to annoying or embarrassing people, those people who never leave you alone (we all have those people). So which is it? Is the parable saying the widow was embarrassing the judge, or is it saying the widow might come and punch the judge?

Jesus probably wants us to think of both. This widow is the kind of woman who will publicly shame the judge if he doesn't do his job. She will embarrass him. She will hit him. She will do whatever it takes to get justice. The judge is afraid of this woman. He's afraid that she'll expose him for what he really is – a heartless and feckless sham.

So what's the point to the parable? The point is in Jesus' question at the end: "When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?" (v.8). But what kind of faith is Jesus looking for?

To Jesus, at least in this parable, faith looks like this widow. Faith looks like a stubborn woman who fights for justice until her dying breath. Whatever she's fighting for, whatever the case, it's worth her punching out a judge. It must be serious. Maybe custody of the kids is at stake. Maybe her life savings is at stake. Think of a mother whose child is sick, and she's fighting the insurance company for every penny because her child's life is at stake. She's in the fight of her life, and she won't give up.

And the opposite of faith is this judge. He has no respect for God or person. He settles for life as it is, not as it should be. He won't pursue this widow's case. Why? He doesn't want to. It's not worth his time. She's not worth his time. There's no fight in him.

The widow is someone who prays continuously and refuses to be discouraged (v.1). The judge is someone who refuses to pray and is continuously discouraged. The lesson of the parable is, be like the widow and not like the judge. Pray like your life depends on it. Always pursue God. Never give up.

Because the truth is, God is *not* like the judge. God is listening. God is paying attention. God is on the move. And we are invited, even encouraged, to hold God to account. Yes, as bold and inappropriate as it sounds, Jesus is saying we are to hold God accountable to God's promises. "You promised justice, God. Where is it?" "You promised healing God. Why don't I see it?" That's the kind of faith the Son of Man is looking for, a faith that believes so passionately in God and God's promises that you're willing to remind God, push God, even challenge God when you see those promises not being fulfilled.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Where do you see God's promises not being fulfilled? Are you willing to tell God how you feel about it?
2. When have you given up on prayer? What happened to you?
3. Are you willing to offer yourself as an answer to your prayers? To someone else's prayers?

Video Questions:

1. What new insights do you have about the character of God from the parables of persistence?
2. If God is persistent in seeking out the least and lost, how should that shape our own behavior towards the marginalized? How should that shape the church's behavior?
3. When have you felt sought after and how did it affect you? Was it cause for celebration when you were brought into the fold?
4. Are you willing to leave behind the glory of 99 to seek out the one that God is calling you to pursue?
5. Are you persistent in prayer or do you give up when you don't get what you want?
6. Have you had the experience of seeing your prayers change from your own desires to being more in line with God's will because you feel closer to God?
7. Who might God be calling you to be more persistent with?