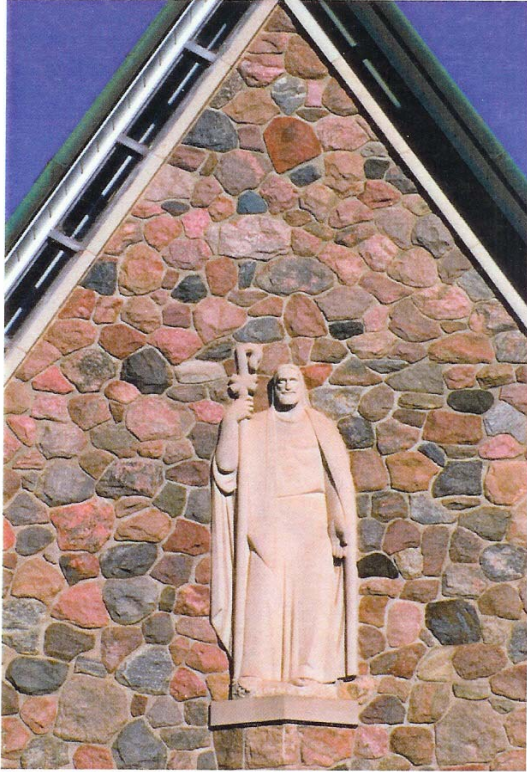


**MEDITATIONS FROM
ORIOLE – YORK MILLS
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This is one in a series of selected sermons and speeches given at Oriole – York Mills United Church. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith. We hope readers benefit from these meditations and the insights they provide.

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LOVE AT THE END OF THE ROAD”

(or "I've Been Waiting on You")

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (*The Message*)

There is a story about a woman who was reminiscing about her father. She said that, when she was young, she was very close to him. The time she enjoyed this closeness the most was when they would have big family gatherings with all the aunts and uncles and cousins. At some point, someone would pull out the old record player, put on polka records and the family would dance. Eventually, someone would put on the "Beer Barrel Polka." When the music began to play, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, "I believe this is our dance." And they would dance. One time, though, she was a teenager and in one of those teenage moods when the "Beer Barrel Polka" began to play. When her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance," she snapped at him: "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" Her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

The woman said their relationship was difficult all through her teen years. "When I came home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe. I would snarl at him: 'What do you think you're doing?' And he would look at me with sad eyes and say, '**I was just waiting on you.**'"

"When I went away to college," she said, "I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him and, for years, I never communicated with him. But as I grew older, I began to miss him." So she decided to go to the next family gathering. When someone put on the "Beer Barrel Polka," she drew a deep breath, walked over to her father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance." He turned to her and said, "**I've been waiting on you.**"¹

I wondered if I should have ended the message with this story instead of using it at the beginning – for Chapter 15 of Luke is really unfinished. Jesus does not tell us what happened to the brothers. Did the older brother finally come to his senses too? Did he at long last come to realize how much his father loved him too? Did he come in and join the party or continue to stay outside? Did the younger brother eventually have a heart-to-heart talk with his father about his years away? Did he really want to go deeper or was he satisfied just to be back home and accepted? Did the brothers eventually reconcile? Jesus does not tell us.

We are told, however, how the first two parables in this chapter end:

"Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home [you would] call in your friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me! I've found my lost sheep!' Count on it -- there's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue."

"Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it -- that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God."

Both of these parables conclude on an inspiring, upbeat note! It is really God, like the shepherd, who says: "Celebrate with me. I've found my lost sheep! And you can count on it – there is great joy in heaven over this one sinner's rescued life." It is really God, like the woman, who says, "Celebrate with me again. I've found my lost coin! And you can count on it," says God, "My angels are throwing some kind of party every time one lost soul turns to Me."

We wish the parable involving human beings, not animals (sheep) and inanimate objects (coins), ended more happily than it does. But relationships among us humans tend to be complicated and messy. Complicated because some of us are grumblers, complainers and difficult to please.

That was certainly the case in Jesus' day. Jesus failed to measure up -- at least for some people. Though the wrong people – the tax collectors and sinners -- loved him, Jesus didn't conform to the standards of the right people -- about whom to be seen with and to eat with. This got him into trouble with some of the local religious leaders, some Pharisees and religion scholars, who observed that "a lot men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus" -- people who did despicable things for a living (such as pig farmers and tax collectors), people who did immoral things (such as liars and adulterers), people who did not keep the law in the right way (such as the Samaritans and Gentiles, people like you and me), the law, that is, according to the 613 rules and regulations set down not by God but by the religious authorities.

Jesus should have known better, they thought. For Jewish people, eating with others was like having a religious experience, a celebration of their faith in fact. Cleanliness was paramount: clean food, clean dishes, clean hands and clean hearts. A proper Jewish meal was a worship service in which believers honoured God by sanctifying the most ordinary details of their lives. So no wonder there was controversy around Jesus who seemed to flout these devout acts.

One day a little girl returned home from church and was asked by her mother about the minister's sermon. She replied, "He talked about Edith," which happened to be the name of her little sister. "What do you mean?" asked her mother. "Well, the minister said, 'He receiveth sinners and Edith with them too.' There's truth there! "He receives sinners and *[insert your name here]* with them too!"

This is a remarkable parable, isn't it? Charles Dickens, the great English author, called the Parable of the Prodigal Son "the greatest story ever told." Others call it the priceless pearl of all Jesus' parables. Down through the centuries, it has inspired artists and writers alike. Rembrandt's famous painting, with the younger son on his knees before the loving and welcoming father, has become for many almost as much of an inspiration as the story itself. The parable speaks with clarity about the wonderful love and forgiving grace of God, who is ready to welcome us back at the first sign of repentance. Its great theme – God's wonderful love and forgiving grace -- is to be enjoyed and celebrated.



REMBRANDT VAN RIJN
Prodigal Son

But there is more depth to this parable than we often assume. Families in those days worked differently from ours. When the father divided the property between the two sons, the younger son would have had to sell his part of the family land for ready cash. This would have brought great shame on the family -- because part of their land was owned by someone else. And this added to the shame the son had already heaped upon his father by asking for his share of the estate before his father's death. It was as if he told his father, "I wish you were dead." And the father bears this double shame, this contempt from his son, without reproaching his son.

Anglican Bishop Tom Wright notes that, "to this day, there are people in traditional cultures, like that of Jesus' day, who find this story quite incredible. Fathers just don't behave like that; the father should (they think) have beaten him, or thrown out."

In our western society, we don't have difficulty with our children leaving home to further their education and vocation, whether across the country or the world. But in Jesus' culture, to abandon your obligation to care for your parents in old age was another shameful act. Shame upon shame heaped upon the father and family -- and all born by the father without recrimination.

Of course the most remarkable character in the story is the father himself. Another title could be “The Parable of the Running Father”! Senior people in such societies did not run in the way this father ran to greet his son. But the lavishness of the welcome is the point of the parable. Jesus is explaining why there is a party, why it’s something to celebrate when people turn from going their own way and begin to go God’s way. The degradation of the son was complete – no Jewish person would be found dead working with pigs. And perhaps that’s the point: the son finally reached the point of virtual death. The father’s closing line says it all, doesn’t it? “This my son was dead and is alive; he was lost and now is found.” How could this not be a cause of celebration?

But there is still the older brother. The parable isn’t complete without looking at the older brother because his character brings us back to the first verses of the chapter. He is very much like those grumblers and complainers who had trouble with Jesus taking in sinners and eating meals with them.

I imagine you have seen, as I have on occasion, workers in our local parks whose job it is to pick up litter on a spiked pole. While the park around them is full of the colourful beauty of the sun-drenched flowers and trees, the park-keeper keeps his or her head down focusing only on the garbage – and misses the shining beauty all around.

So focused were the self-righteous religious types on the people who did contemptible things for a living (such as pig farmers and tax collectors), so focused were they on the people who did immoral things (such as liars and adulterers), so focused were they on the people who did not keep the hundreds of rules in the right way (such as the Samaritans and Gentiles, people like you and me), they were blind to the shining love and grace of God. They failed to see how much God loved those people too and how they were being changed -- being healed and having their lives transformed physically, emotionally, morally and spiritually. The grumblers could see only litter, the human garbage they normally despised and avoided.

The story is not quite finished though. Jesus left some loose ends. But maybe that is as it should be. For you and I, as individuals and together as the church, have some questions of our own to consider as a result of this parable by Jesus. How can we be people through whom those who are seemingly dead come to life? How can we celebrate and party over God’s love in such a way as to welcome not only the younger brothers who have come back from the dead but also the older brothers and sisters who thought there was nothing wrong with them? Those are our questions.

Award-winning journalist Lee Strobel, former atheist, former legal journalist, now author, Christian minister and broadcaster, wrote a helpful book (in 2000) titled *The Case for Faith*. It is based on an interview he did with Charles Templeton here in Toronto. Many of you will remember the late Charles Templeton as an author, inventor and radio personality. It is also well known that Charles Templeton’s early career as a Christian evangelist was outstanding. Some even predicted he would eclipse Billy Graham as the most significant evangelist of his time. But that was a long time ago, before Templeton endured some questions that crippled his faith. Strobel writes with compassion when he says: “Today Templeton’s faith – repeatedly punctured by persistent and obstinate doubts – has leaked away. Maybe forever.” **Maybe**, notes Strobel, because he had an element of doubt in his own mind about where Templeton’s heart would eventually take him.

Strobel goes on to record what Templeton said in the interview about his movement from faith to doubt, from minister to agnostic, his feelings about the illusion of faith and also his great attraction to Jesus.

Templeton said of Jesus: "Well, he's the most important thing in my life. I...I...I", he stuttered, "I know it may sound strange, but I have to say ... I adore him!" Further on in the interview he declared, "In my view, [Jesus] is the most important human being who has ever existed."

That's when Charles Templeton uttered the unexpected words: "And if I may put it this way," his voice began to crack, "I ... miss ... him!"

Remember the story at the beginning: the daughter who was so glad to get out of her father's house and away from him. For years she never communicated with him. But as she grew older, she began to miss him. So she went to the next family gathering. And when someone put on the "Beer Barrel Polka," she walked over to her father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance." And her father turned and said, "**I've been waiting on you.**"

Standing at the centre of our lives is the gracious, loving God who says to us: "Everything I have is yours. All that I am is for you. **I've been waiting on you.**" Amen.

¹From a story by Presbyterian professor Rev. Dr. Tom Long.

Rev. Chris Miller
Lent 4C
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