

At the beginning of his 15th chapter Luke tells us that the scribes and Pharisees were complaining about Jesus. The charge, as usual, was “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus responds by telling three parables. In the first one, a shepherd leaves his ninety-nine sheep to find the one that was lost. He searches the wilderness for the lost sheep, and after finding it he says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost.” In the second parable a poor woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She still has nine, but she tears the house apart looking for the one lost coin. On finding it she also says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost.” The third parable is the well-known story of the prodigal son who demands his inheritance before his father dies. He squanders it all in a distant country in dissolute living. He then gets a job feeding pigs, which is a tragic line of work for a young Jewish man. Eventually he is so hungry he considers eating the food he’s feeding the pigs. At that point, “he came to himself” and remembered his father’s house. So, he returns home rehearsing a speech about how badly he has sinned and is no longer worthy of being called his son. Meanwhile his elder brother remained at home, working in the family fields. The father is so excited when he sees the prodigal son returning that he runs down the road to embrace him. He gives him the best robe in the house, places a ring on his finger, sandals on his bare feet, and orders the servants to kill the fatted calf for a celebration because his son who was lost has now been found.

All three of these parables depict the joy of God in finding the lost. This message is deeply engrained in our understanding of the Gospel. The Savior came in search of the lost—we understand that. But I have spent most of my ministry around careful parishioners who attend careful churches. And so I’ve got to ask what do these parables have to say to the elder brother, the nine coins which were not lost and the ninety-nine sheep who did not wander away?

The shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep vulnerable to go off searching for one that’s lost? And we’re not told anything about leaving them in the care of another shepherd. What kind of shepherd would do that? Then he gets all excited about finding the lost one. He throws it on his shoulders and returns saying, “Rejoice with me.” The other ninety-nine sheep must have rolled their eyes. Much as the elder brother did when he returns from working another long day in the father’s fields of “working like a slave.” He hears music and dancing in the house, so he calls out to one of the servants asking, “What’s going on?” The servant says, “Your brother blew all his money on prostitutes. So, he came back home, and the old man is throwing a party. He killed your 4-H calf.” The elder brother has a big problem with the injustice of this and refuses to enter the celebration.

I grew up in a wing of the church that had Sunday night worship services that serious Christians were expected to attend in addition to Sunday morning. This is just one of the reasons that in college I became a Presbyterian. One of the highlights of the Sunday night service was the telling of “testimonies” during which a member of the church would describe their faith journey. Even as a boy it didn’t take me long to realize a standard pattern to these stories. In the first part you would say, “I used to be a terrible person.” In the second part you would describe your conversion or being saved. And then in the third part you would express gratitude for now being a better person. So, a bad person met Jesus and became a good person.

To this day I do not doubt the sincerity or the authenticity of any of these testimonies. More to the point, these conversion stories are deeply engrained in our understanding of the gospel. If I say, “I once was lost…” you have to find yourself thinking, “but now am found.” Yes, this is the Amazing Grace that goes to the core of the church’s message. But what does Amazing Grace mean to those who did not run away and lose everything in dissolute living, who have been careful, worked hard, provided for others, and followed the rules? When these folks try to confess their sins they are, well, boring. Frankly, the elder brother does not really understand what it means to say, “I once was lost.”

But there is a reason Jesus put him in the parable, which means we cannot collapse the elder brother into the prodigal. We cannot say he is really just as lost as his younger brother, but doesn't know it. That's not what the father does in this story because it wouldn't make sense to his elder son who worked so hard to do what is right. As William James said in his classic book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, not everyone is born twice, or as we would now say born again. Some have the religious experience of being born once and growing up in a faith they never leave. The reason the elder brother is in the story is that like the Pharisees and Scribes to whom Jesus told these parables he represents those of us who are good, hard working, people who've always been devoted to our faith. Also, notice that the parable doesn't judge or condemn the elder brother. It just leaves him outside of the party...where he believes he needs to be.

The Catholic Theologian Karl Rahner claimed the Bible presents more than one kind of spirituality. It affirms, what he calls, both wintry and summery spirituality. Summery Christians like their faith hot. They feel the presence of God like they feel the warm sun on their faces. They know they've been saved, and they love to express praise to their Savior. So, worship for them is entering the celebration the father threw after the prodigal returned. But wintry Christians find that expression of faith way too hot. So they stay on the margins of it, out in the fields with the elder brother. They have a lonelier faith that is bothered by hard questions, injustice, and doubts. So, if they're going to worship it has to be in a place where doubts are affirmed.

Summery Christians like praise choruses and strong sturdy hymns focused on God's glory. Wintry Christians prefer their hymns in minor keys. Rahner's point is that both forms of spirituality are found in the Bible. For example, summery Christians like Psalm 100: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord" while wintry Christians like Psalm 22: "Why, my God? Why?" Wintry Christians are consumed by the question "Why?" They cannot understand why bad things happen to good people, why the promised peaceable reign of Christ is so slow in coming to a world marred with violence in places like Ukraine and the Middle East. And they cannot understand why there is little joy in their carefully constructed lives. Why? Why? By contrast summery Christians prefer the question "Where? Where should I worship? Where should I serve? Where should I spend my life? I'll go if I can just figure out God's will. Where is it? Where?" Wintry Christians would love to tell summery Christians where to go, but they never talk to each other.

Again, both forms of spirituality are biblical. God made all the seasons, and the church needs to make room for them as well. There is the spirituality of the prodigal who needs to testify "I once was lost but now am found." Some will say, "I once was lost in sin..." Others will say they once were lost in addiction, or grief, or loneliness, but by amazing grace they are lost no longer. But there is also the lonely spirituality of the elder brother who is confused by what God does and does not do.

It is incredibly significant that the father doesn't just wait in the party for his elder son to enter it. He leaves the celebration to find him, to hear his protest, to be with him. He even pleads with him, which is something he does not do with the prodigal. The father wants both sons to find their way into his arms. But they were pulled out of those arms for different reasons and will have to take different paths if they are going to get back there.

Sin is anything that separates you from those holy arms. That can be squandering your life in dissolute living, and it can be living a life that is dead right, in which you win the argument but not the yearning of your soul. Grace doesn't mean getting what you deserve. It is about getting what you need in spite of either your disastrous, or careful, choices. It is about God's choice not to be separated from you.

If the point of the parable is to make it into their father's arms and enter the celebration, we know the prodigal got there. And we know the elder brother was invited. But we don't know if this one who prided himself on his ever so careful choices will choose to enter those arms that have always been stretched out to him. So the parable is unfinished. It's up to us elder brothers to complete the story. We have to decide if we want what we deserve, or the grace we need. Amen.