

Christ Collides with Our Priorities. Sermon for TUMC

Tim Schmucker: Lent 3, March 23, 2025

I. Intro

My family got tired of me telling them the truth. When my spouse or kids commented that they don't have enough time to do something that they really wanted to do, I'd respond "We all have the time to do what's important for us." And that's the truth. It's a fact about our priorities, right? So, when one family member bemoaned that they didn't have time to exercise and work out regularly, I responded "you do have time; you just have to adjust your priorities." Or when another lamented that they were too busy with work and university to volunteer at our local food bank, I suggested that perhaps their love of video games was more important than helping the less-fortunate.

But surprise, surprise, they didn't appreciate my statements of facts. They would retort to me strongly that I was judging how they spent their time, that I was criticising their priorities. Eventually I got it. It took me a while—I'm a slow relationship learner at times—but I've stopped responding like that. It's still true though, even I was judgmental and even a bit obnoxious. We do make time for what is important to us. When you can't find time for something, that indicates it's not enough of a priority for you. And there's more. Our life decisions—the small daily ones and the huge life-long ones—reflect our priorities, our values. They shape our days and our years—how we spend our time, our energy, our relationships, and yes of course our money.

And then Christ collides with our priorities. That's today's Lenten theme, and Luke chapter 15 is our scriptural text. Jesus' three parables here are quite familiar. I know these parables well. Perhaps you do also. So I wondered how I could hear and read them again as if for the first time. So, I invited several TUMC elders¹ who live at St Clair

¹ Not all TUMC elders who live at SCOC were available for this bible study. We are also blessed with many other elders who live elsewhere in the GTA.

O'Connor to join me in a bible study. We read the parables together, observing, asking questions, and considering first century middle east cultural details. We then explored their relevance for today's theme "Christ Collides with our Priorities." Their insights have informed this sermon. Thank you, Harriet, Erna and Aldred.

II. Three parables

Luke 15 begins with the grumbling Pharisees and religious law experts. They are criticising Jesus for eating and hanging out with "sinners." Jesus confronts them by telling three parables—each featuring something that is lost. The first two parables are short, about a lost sheep and a lost silver coin. The third parable is quite long. Perhaps because it's about two brothers who are lost. Apparently, we humans are more complicated than a silver coin or a sheep, so this third parable requires 21 verses rather than just three or four! But I'm getting ahead of Jesus' story sequence.

In his first parable, Jesus says to the grumbling religious leaders: Imagine you have 100 sheep, and one strays away. Without a doubt you will leave the 99 in their pasture and search for the one lost until you find it. And when you find it, you'll be so thrilled that you'll gather all your friends and neighbours to celebrate with you. The lost has been found!

In the second parable, a woman loses one of her silver coins. She of course meticulously searches every nick and cranny in her house until she finds it. And she also calls together her friends and neighbours to celebrate that the lost has been found.

At the end of each parable, just in case the critical religious leaders don't get it, Jesus makes his point explicit. Just as the shepherd and the woman rejoice with their friends and neighbours that the lost has been found, "in the same way, there will be abounding joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life." Celebration breaks out! Jesus hangs out with the lost, because righteous people have no need to change their hearts and lives. God the loving parent is the shepherd and the woman

who relentlessly search for the lost, calling them back to God. When they are found, when they change heart and life, God celebrates; boundless joy erupts throughout the entire community.

The third parable is more complex; two brothers are lost, albeit in quite different ways. There is also rejoicing and celebration, but not all participate. The parable has traditionally been titled “The Prodigal Son” but I think that’s an incomplete moniker. Prodigal means reckless and extravagant. The younger son was only “prodigal” at the very beginning, but the father was “prodigal” with his compassion throughout the entire parable. The father was reckless and extravagant with grace and restoration. So, a more accurate title is “The Prodigal Parent.”

The Prodigal Parent with his lost sons is one of Jesus’ best-known parables. Yet with two thousand years of history and culture between then and us today, there are fascinating cultural implications that we can miss. Let’s take a look. Let’s also remember Pastor Peter’s description of parables in his sermon two weeks ago as “having unexpected images or outcomes,” that listeners could be shocked or upset, or could burst out laughing.” So hang on.

A son tells his father to give him his inheritance; this was inconceivable in first-century Palestine—tantamount to wishing one’s father dead. In an honor-and-shame society, this deserved being dis-inherited. A father would declare the son "dead to me," and the village would sever all ties. A formal "cutting off" ceremony would mark his exile, making him as if he never existed.

But this father defies cultural norms and priorities. He does not perform the "cutting off," but instead grants his younger son's request, which brings shame upon himself. Luke uses the Greek word *bios* (bee'-os) for "property," meaning "life itself." By giving half his “bee-os” to his son, the father isn’t just losing property and wealth; he is surrendering part of his very existence.

The son then squanders his inheritance in “extravagant living” and, when destitute, takes a job feeding pigs. For a Jew, this was unthinkable—pigs were unclean, impure. Worse still, he longs to eat their food. Desperate, he decides to return home, knowing he will face humiliation and scorn, first from the villagers and then from his father. He will have to prostrate himself and beg.

Yet, while he is still far off, his father sees him and is moved with compassion. The father hikes up his robes—something no dignified man would do—exposing his legs as he runs to embrace his son. By doing so, he publicly takes on his son’s shame, shielding him from community scorn and contempt. The son’s restoration comes not through apology or penance but through the father’s boundless compassion. Shame is erased. Joy abounds. The lost is found. And it’s time to celebrate!

But not all rejoice. The older son returns from the field to hear music and dancing. Learning his brother has been welcomed back “safe and sound”—a phrase echoing shalom and full reconciliation—he is furious. This is more than a homecoming; it is a public declaration of restoration. Outraged, he refuses to enter, rejecting both his father’s compassion and his brother’s reintegration.

His reaction is as scandalous as the younger son’s rebellion. As firstborn, he should be at his father’s side, upholding family honour. But yet again, the father does the unimaginable—he leaves the feast to plead with his eldest son, thus bearing his shame just as he did for the younger. But the elder brother seethes: “I have served you all these years and never disobeyed, yet you’ve never given me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends!” He sees and feels injustice. His brother deserves exile, banishment, not a feast. But the father’s love is not about fairness—it is about restoration.

Jesus’ story comes full circle. The younger son dishonoured his family privately; now the older one does so publicly. In front of 200 guests, he refuses to acknowledge his brother, calling him only “this son of yours.” Yet again, the father meets disgrace with grace. He does not reprimand but invites his older son to see with the eyes of

compassion: "Your brother was dead and is alive, lost and now found." The Prodigal Parent. Recklessly extravagant with their love, compassion and grace.

III. Questions and observations

Reading these parables with the three TUMC elders, we had lots of questions and observations, some of which stretched the parables' symbolism even though they were quite interesting and playful. Still, they pushed the metaphors to the point that exploring them further would not enhance our understanding of Jesus' message. For example,

1. How could a lone sheep wander off so far that it gets lost? Sheep always stay together.
2. Was the silver coin a Roman drachma or a Jewish shekel? How much was it worth?
3. Why would you have a large celebration because you found a lost coin that you misplaced? I'd just be embarrassed and then quietly relieved.
4. Did restoring the younger son mean that when the father died, the remaining estate—which was apparently still extensive—was divided between the two brothers? So would the older brother receive only 25%? And the younger 75%?

Other questions and observations in our bible study however probed the core of the metaphors. For example:

1. The shepherd took quite the risk leaving the 99 sheep alone to go and search for a lone lost one.
2. Sometimes people wander off and become lost because they don't feel welcome or included in a group. Who are the lost anyway?
3. The image of God as a woman searching for something lost would have been striking even shocking in Jesus' patriarchal culture.
4. Don't the righteous also need to change their "hearts and lives" at times?
5. How could the father be so forgiving after being so deeply hurt? The forgiveness and restoration were immediate. All the wayward son had to do was return.

Playful and probing questions and observations! That's the richness of small group bible study. I recommend it.

IV. Parable Priorities

Applying these parables to our Lenten theme today, we can declare that Christ collides with priorities, that God calls us to prioritise:

- Compassion rather than honour
- Love rather than shame
- Grace over penance
- Redemption over punishment
- Inclusion rather than boundaries

V. Christ collides: Elder wisdom

Also, the three TUMC elders had some additional wisdom to offer us. First, they did not resonate with the theme of Christ colliding with their priorities. They have lived their entire lives as followers of Jesus, and so they suggest an alternative: that Christ shapes our priorities. This image of Christ shaping and guiding our priorities feels more accurate for them, rather than colliding with.

They also talked about the losses they've experienced as they've aged. These losses are collisions too, yet they affirm that "aging also comes with brightness, with light. You're given strength and new insights, and you adapt to the changes and losses." The elder continued, "that strength comes through people, through relationships. This is what the church does, offering strength in our faith and in our community."

We explored further several of their observations and questions on the parables. They reflected on what would be a comparable situation of loss today. As parents, losing a child to addictions or destructive lifestyles quickly came to their thoughts. And they resonated with shepherd's and the woman's singular focus on searching for their lost,

and with the prodigal parent in receiving their lost child with love, compassion and grace.

Secondly, the older brother seems to have a reasonable complaint, they observed. He served his father for many years and always obeyed yet the father never offered him the means to have a celebration with a small group of friends. It seems that the father took him for granted. So much so that he did not tell the older son working out in the fields that his brother had returned, and that a celebration was beginning. Instead, the older son happened upon the celebration by accident, while it was in full swing. His father apparently left him outside the party. At least initially.

While this observation could be filed under the category of “pushes the parable’s symbolism too far”, these three elders took it in a meaningful direction. As parents, they reflected on the fact that our children are all different, they all have different needs and capacities, and so “fair” does not mean “the same” or equal. So also, with our parent God. As God’s children we all have differing needs, and so we experience God’s grace, compassion and restoration in the measure that we need at specific times in our lives.

This insight led us to reflect on diversity and inclusion at TUMC. As a congregation, we welcome people of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender identities, generations, abilities, and accents. Yet our elders urged us to consider how we might live more fully into our embrace of all. Our rich diversity means that some among us have deep, multi-generational roots in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, while others have encountered and embraced Mennonite theology and faith as adults—some from other traditions, some from none.

The three elders of the bible study suggest that we can do more to invite everyone into the depth and richness of our 500-year tradition of following Jesus, where faith has shaped our priorities—at times at great personal cost. We acknowledged that both we and our forebears have at times fallen short. Yet by deepening our collective rootedness in faith, we create space for growth in understanding that enhances our

community. Those of us with deep historic Mennonite roots can learn from those who come with fresh eyes—eyes that often see more clearly the values and priorities that shape us as a congregation. Together, we can grow deeper in faith.

VI. Closing

In closing, when our elders reflected on losses today, they heartily affirmed celebration. “I really like the idea of celebrating,” one shared. “We know that we're in the last chapter of our life and at any time we can lose our health. So let's celebrate now.” They continued, “let's be extravagant – not spending a lot of money, but extravagant in the celebratory sense.”

Indeed, let's celebrate God's priorities for life: Compassion and love. Grace and redemption. Inclusion of all. The Prodigal God—celebrating in reckless exuberance. Amen!