

Luke 15 has been called by Biblical scholars ‘The chapter of lost things’. In it we find a lost sheep, a lost coin and, most famously, a lost son – the Prodigal Son. This story, maybe next to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, is arguably the most famous and, likely, the most beloved parable told by Jesus. All of these lost things are found in the end. Thus, they are parables of hope – hope for the sinner and all those who feel lost and forsaken. Saint Augustine wrote: “There is no saint without a past, no sinner without a future.” The Prodigal Son story is a story about the sinner who becomes a saint, the lost which was found and the dead man who came to life again. Though the story of the Prodigal Son begins in Luke 15:11, it is important to understand the full context of why Jesus told it. We hear in Luke 15: 1-2, “The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Thus, Jesus addresses the parable to both groups, and each will have something to learn from his words. Jesus begins his parable with ‘two sons’ – these sons in many ways represent his listeners. The ‘younger son’ is a representation of the tax collectors and the ‘older son’ (who appears at the end of the story) is a symbol of the Pharisees and religious leaders. Yet, as we shall see, these two sons represent teach of us as well. These sons have one ‘Father’ -- a symbol of our common Father in Heaven. The younger son will commit three major flaws at the outset of the story. The first is that the son demands his share of the estate that is to come to him. Second, the son treats his Father as though his Father were dead (since, of course, an inheritance is normally given after a person dies). Third, a point that is a little less obvious, is that the younger son in Jewish culture typically did not get a share in the inheritance. Thus, within two short verses the younger son is painted as a selfish sinner. Moreover, a few words often overlooked are ‘after a few days’ – in other words, the son takes the Father’s inheritance and then lords it over him for a few days before leaving home. One might see this as the ‘fourth’ sin committed by the younger son. The ‘inheritance’ symbolizes the gifts God gives us. Here, the prodigal son, takes his inheritance and uses it on a life of ‘dissipation’. The word ‘prodigal’ is a word that comes from the Latin root meaning ‘to consume wastefully’. Though the word does not appear in the parable, centuries ago it became the shorthand word to describe this younger son. The younger son seeks meaning away from his Father. In the words of St. Augustine, his request to have his share of the estate ‘epitomizes the depraved inclination in the human person to withdraw from God’ – done primarily as a consequence of original sin.’ The son has strayed from his Father and now the consequences of leaving the safety of his Father’s voice and word comes crashing in. The prodigal son is in darkness and looks up and ‘comes to his senses’. Before he acts with his body (moving out of the mud), he will use his mind. The prodigal son remembers the good place which was his Father’s house. He recalls the abundance, the goodness and the love that was present there. The story in many ways now shifts. The prodigal son now becomes a model for us. He is humbled by his sin and does not think to himself, “I will go back to my Father and he will let me in because that is what a Father does.” Instead, he recognizes that ‘he no longer deserves to be called a son’. He is now a model for humility and contrition. After returning to his Father and begging for his forgiveness, the Father shows only his mercy and love. The Father makes no mention of his sin as the son’s actions reflect his true and perfect contrition. The Father demonstrates the ‘joy in heaven over one sinner who repents’ that Jesus mentions at the end of the parable of the lost sheep earlier in Luke 15 -- “I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.” The Father approaches the son and showers him with mercy and forgiveness – seven things in total. He embraces him (1), kisses him (2), puts the finest robe on him (3), puts a ring on finger (4), sandals on his feet (5), they slaughter the fattened calf (6) and celebrate with a feast (7). Seven as a symbol of perfection is here the representation of the super-abundance of God’s mercy and redemption poured out upon the son. This part of the story alone is an amazing and beautiful illustration of God’s mercy and redemption. But, recall that Jesus is addressing two groups – the tax collectors and the Pharisees. The tax collectors are like the young son who does not deserve the inheritance that God promised, but God, through his abundant mercy (c.f. 1 Peter 1: 3), demonstrates in turn his power. We now, though, turn to the ‘older son’ who was out working in the field. The older son represents the Pharisees and all those who struggle with pride -- namely all of us. The older son, too, is quick to point out the sin of his brother, but ignores his own failings and weaknesses. The Prodigal Son is a parable that encapsulates the Christian life and the heart of God. It is universal in that it tells our story -- the story of broken humanity, but also of God’s redemption and forgiveness. St. John of the Cross wrote, “In the twilight of life, God will not judge us on our earthly possessions and human success, but rather on how much we have loved.”