

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera, QLD

30th March 2025, Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

MERCY AND LOVE

Think about the stories that you really like, whether they are books, movies, or TV shows. What is it that you like about them, what engages you, what entertains you, what brings you back to thinking about or maybe reading or watching them again and again? Is it that they are suspenseful, or full of action, or perhaps they have characters you would like to emulate in one way or another? Do you like the stories which are non-stop action, or those which spend a lot of time with descriptions and setting the scene? Do the stories you like push the bounds of space or time or even human experience, and cause you to think a bit outside the box? For you, is a good story about escapism, that it is written or presented in such a way that for a while you can leave the realities of this life and immerse yourself in another? For you, what are the qualities that make a good story, perhaps even a favourite story, that you either literally or mentally come back to again and again?

There are many components to this, they are different for each of us, and in my experience they certainly change over time and stage of life. I wonder if one aspect of what makes a good story for us which is often there but we don't always think of, is that it is relatable. As I think about the stories which I like, there are things about one or more of the characters, or the plot, or perhaps even where it is set, which I can relate to, so that draws me in, holds my interest, and helps me to apply what is going on a bit more to myself also. A story which is relatable is one which I can feel a part of, and so I feel connected to it and able to think about what I can learn from it for my life.

One of the best-loved parables, or teaching stories, of Jesus, and probably also one of the best-known parts of the Bible, is what we often call the 'Parable of the Lost/Prodigal Son'. And I have to think that one reason for this that it is very relatable for us. As Jesus begins this story with, 'Once a man had two sons', straight away we all know what it is to be a child with a parent, and many of us also know what that relationship means from the parent's side. And of course, there are two sons here, which makes us also

think about the dynamics of family relationships; you know, how they often look quite smooth and settled from the outside, but as we get a deeper glimpse inside we find that is not the case. Looked at from the view of both our relationship to others, and to God, this is a story which we can readily relate to.

Think about the characters here. The youngest son; offending his father by asking for his inheritance right now, going off to the bright lights of the city to waste it all in 'wild living', finding himself at rock bottom when his money runs out and he wishes he could eat the food of the pigs he is minding, making the long trip home rehearsing the speech of sorrow for what he has done, then being not just welcomed home but restored back to the position of son. Can we put ourselves into that picture? It is such a simple, but great, picture of our relationship with God, isn't it? We receive all we need from God, and more, but still we want to go our own way. While we might get pleasure from that for a while, eventually we find ourselves in a place where we know we need God's help. And when we turn back to God, like this father He is always waiting to welcome us back, through Jesus restoring us to a full relationship with Him. How do you go putting yourself into the part of the youngest son in this story?

What about the oldest son, can we relate to him? This parable is so long we often cut his part at the end off, but it is just as important. In fact, the story should be called the 'Parable of the Lost Sons', because both are lost, in different ways. This son is lost not because he gets involved in 'wild living', but in his work. He thinks it is all about what he does, and what he deserves, so he gets upset when his brother returns and all is forgiven. How do you go relating to him? Like the Pharisees to whom Jesus originally told this story, the older son's reaction is a mirror for us about how we at times judge people, how we might not fully welcome in those who come into God's family because they don't want to do things like we do, changes are made for their sake, things don't always stay the way they used to be. It's easy to be like him, isn't it; notions of fairness, and following the accepted rules and norms, and being treated as we believe we have earned the right to be treated, are very much a part of both our human natures and our societies. But that's not how this family, nor how God's family, works. In God's family, no matter how long you've been around, or where you've come from, or who you are, everyone is equal. The older brother was lost because he couldn't see that, just like we can't sometimes see that either.

And how about the third character here, the father; can we relate to him? I confess that as a parent I find it hard to relate to the amount of patience and grace he shows to his two wayward children; that's something I could often do with more of. But seeing myself as either of those sons, and God as the Father, I can easily put myself in this story. The kind of mercy and love which is shown by the father when his wandering son returns home is what I experience with God's love in my life; as I read and experience His Word of comfort and forgiveness, as I remember His guarantee of unending love in my baptism, as I touch and taste His forgiveness and acceptance of me in Holy Communion. The scenes, characters and actions of this parable are ones I can easily place myself into when I see me being either of the sons here, and God as being the loving Father.

Because there are two things we learn here which are so important to us. The first is that God's grace is there for us all. As we move through Lent and towards Easter, we are reminded again and again that God sent Jesus to die and rise for each one of us. That's what the picture of the father running towards and freely forgiving the lost son is all about – God's love for us in Jesus on the cross. As much as we turn away from Him, He is waiting to welcome us back. With Jesus dying on the cross for us, God shows us that like this father, His mercy and love for us has no limits. That's something to know. That's something to celebrate. That's something to ask Him to help us to be a part of everyday.

And the second thing for us to learn here is what we learn from the older brother – we are called to share and to show God's love. The three 'Lost' parables in Luke 15 are told by Jesus because He was accused of talking and eating with 'sinners'. The older brother represents both those who made this accusation towards Jesus, and also the attitude we can have at times. The message from the father is that each one is important; both those come into the family, and also those who have been there all the time. For us, as members of God's family, the call is to be a part of helping others to know God's love. We do this in how we live our lives, how we treat people, the witness we give in all we say and do.

And we also do it as a community. Just over 30 years ago the people of the Currumbin and Miami Lutheran churches had a calling to form the Christian community of St. Andrews; with the vision of a congregation, college, and aged care home being together to live out and share God's love with people,

‘from the cradle to the grave’. In the time since then, think about how many people, how many families, have heard the news of this loving Father, including many who might not have heard it otherwise. How many staff and students have sat in chapel services, in Christian studies classes, and also experienced God’s love in how they are taught, how they are treated, the values the College upholds? How many have been residents at the Aged Care, attending chapel services, participating in other activities, celebrating special Christian days, and again experiencing what God’s love and grace means in how they are treated, the care they are provided? How many families of both groups have seen and experienced God’s love at work, again in ways they might not otherwise come into contact with? How many have been regular and faithful worshippers of this congregation, how many have come into this church family, how many people have received Holy Communion, how many baptisms have been performed? While it is not always perfect, this St. Andrews community relates to the family the younger son came home to, not because of we who are a part of it, but because of the Father who is over it.

Perhaps there is another part of what makes a good story which I haven’t referred to yet, and that is as well as being relatable it is also life-changing in some way; it brings us a message which changes what we think and what we do. And again, the ‘Parable of the Lost Son’, or ‘Lost Sons’, or ‘Loving Father’, certainly does that. It reminds us of God’s grace, God’s mercy and love, for us in our life, and about what it means for us to be a part of God’s family. Thank God for that, and pray that we will always stay living in this love, and be a part of His work in sharing this love with others. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Think about stories of any kind which you really like. What are the things about these stories which make them special for you?
- Reflect on three characters in this parable. How do you go relating to each one: in what ways are you like the son who goes away? How are you like the older brother who get jealous when his wayward brother is welcomed back? How does the mercy and love of the father reflect your own relationship with God?
- Is there one aspect of this parable which really stands out for you?
- We are now called to show and share the love we receive from the Father so more people can know it also. How can/do you do this, both individually and as part of a group or community?

Pray: thank God that He is the loving Father who always welcomes us back when we turn to Him. Ask Him to help us to both remain in His love and also to share this love with others.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
30.03.2025*