

March 31, Lent 4C (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

What if we are the Pharisees?

by [Justo L. González](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue

Sometimes little stories from our youth come back to mind later with renewed and unexpected meaning. When I was seven or eight I giggled at a story about a man who went to the movies and, upon seeing the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer roaring lion, decided that he had already seen that movie and walked out of the theater. Silly as the story may be, I now take it as a warning—because many of us do something similar when we hear scripture that we already know well.

“There was a man who had two sons,” we hear in the Gospel lesson for today. We immediately recognize this as the beginning of the parable of the prodigal son, so we may decide that we do not have to pay much attention—we already know the story and its point.

But when we really listen to it, scripture can surprise us. This is part of what makes it the word of God: no matter the situation in which we find ourselves, when we read it afresh God speaks to us and our circumstances. Today, as we read this passage within the context of Lent, that context may help us hear a new word.

The assigned reading begins with three verses that serve as an introduction not only to this parable but also to two others: the lost sheep and the lost coin. Obviously, one thing the three stories have in common is the theme of being lost. The shepherd loses a sheep, the woman loses a coin, and the father loses a son. Therefore, we usually look at these parables as words of hope and invitation for the lost. And that is certainly one of their meanings.

However, when we look at these three parables in the context of Lent, another dimension comes forth. The introduction provides a different setting than we usually imagine. The Pharisees and scribes are disgruntled because Jesus is receiving tax collectors and sinners. And the parable is addressed to these Pharisees and scribes, not primarily to those whom they consider sinners.

Despite all the bad press that Christians later gave them, the Pharisees and scribes were deeply religious people. They were very concerned with obeying God and all the religious laws of Israel. From their perspective it was those others, the tax collectors and sinners, who were lost. So the Pharisees and scribes would be unlikely to identify themselves with the lost sheep that the shepherd rescues or the lost son whose father awaits. They would see themselves as the 99 sheep, as the obedient son—and it would be shocking to see these sheep abandoned in the wilderness while the shepherd searches for the other one, to see the son missing the feast thrown for his brother. The parables would speak of the error of considering themselves faithful and obedient.

In Lent it would be good for us to listen to the parable of the two sons while moving back and forth between seeing ourselves as the lost son who is received with open arms and the obedient one who apparently thinks he is more deserving. Lent is a time to consider both the grace of God that has sought and welcomed us and the constant danger that religious people face: thinking that we are better.

Jesus is addressing the best and most religious people in Israel. And yet, while Jesus addresses those who consider themselves “not lost,” the lost are overhearing what he says. In a way, we are the lost overhearing what Jesus says to those who believe that they are not lost. From this perspective, this parable—and the other two in the same chapter—is a parable of joy and promise. No matter how far we have strayed, God awaits us with open arms and a feast of welcome. We have experienced the joy of God welcoming us when we least deserved it, and for that we must rejoice.

But once we have experienced such welcome and rejoiced in it, we have to watch out for our tendency to stand with the never lost, to rely on our having been found. During Lent, it becomes quite easy to adopt such an attitude. It is a season when we examine ourselves, purify our lives, sacrifice our wants for the needs of others, and in general seek to become like the son who has always obeyed his father. When this happens, we must realize that the parable speaks to us not so much as the sinners who overhear it but rather as the Pharisees and scribes who resent Jesus’ welcoming attitude toward those who are not as good as they are.

Lent invites us to count ourselves continually among both groups, as we seek to obey God in all things while also grounding our joy in the experience of being found. So when you hear that “a father had two sons,” do not decide that you have already seen the movie and have nothing new to learn.