

More Than One Set of Lenses
A Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Last week I remarked that the first order of business for me each day is to get the right set of lenses in front of my eyes. This week I decided to wear my eyeglasses, to show you what I am talking about. I purchased this pair of eyeglasses seventeen years ago. They are still my favorite. They are small, light and comfortable. I feel like I barely have anything on my face when I am wearing them.

When I first got these eyeglasses, back in 2005 I could see perfectly with them. By 2010 my eyes were ready for my first pair of bifocals. A few months ago I got this new pair of bifocals, which I really like, because they are a fun color and I can see very well with them. I also have this pair of clip-on sunglasses for those days when it is very sunny.

You, like me, might end up with a couple of pairs of eyeglasses. We would like for life to be simple, but in the end, life is complicated. Accidents happen. People make mistakes. People get sick. Good friends change over time. Especially as we get older, there can be many complications in life. We need to get the right set of lenses in front of our eyes. We also find that one set of lenses is not enough for understanding the meaning of life.

This is why I am passionate about Holy Scripture. Each year, with more years of experience in life and more years of experience in reading the scriptures, we learn more ways to see the path of discipleship. We need to get the right set of lenses in front of our eyes, and we also need more than one set of lenses in order to understand scripture and see God's way of love.

In our lessons last week Jesus was encouraging us to lay aside the lenses of blame and judgment, and to use the lenses of productivity and creativity. We are created in God's image. We are called to be co-creators with God. So we use the lenses of productivity and creativity to look at our lives. We ask, 'How is God calling us to be productive in the context we are in?'

In this week's Gospel passage *All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Jesus responds by telling a parable. Once again Jesus tells us to lay aside the lenses of blame and judgment. Once again Jesus offers better lenses for understanding life.

Today's parable is not found in any of the other Gospels. The rich truths of parables slip past our view when we simplify or stay fixated on a single detail of the parable. We have a way simplifying today's parable by referring to it as the parable of the prodigal son. We might learn more from this parable if we referred to it as the parable of the two sons and their father. The parable is richly descriptive of actions and feelings of all three characters.

And so the story begins: *There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'* So he divided his **life** between them. Let's notice that, even though our Bibles say *the man divided his property between them*, the Greek word translated as property is a form of the word 'bios', meaning 'life'. Normally this division of the property or the man's life would not happen until after the death of the father. The son's request is highly disrespectful in the extreme. The younger son is effectively saying 'you are as if you were dead to me.'

So the son is making every attempt to break his relationship with the father. The story continues to get worse, to the point that he takes a job feeding the pigs on the farm of a Gentile. This is not a small detail in the story. The Torah forbids Jews from having any contact with pigs, and specifically forbids them from raising pigs. Let's notice that the story says, *But when the son came to himself* he determined to return to his father's farm and take on the role of a servant. This is the turning point for the son and for us: he came to himself.

While the son was *still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* Let's notice the father ran to his son. In the culture surrounding Jesus this description sends off loud sirens of warning. Fathers were never to run to

greet their sons. Sons were permitted to run to their fathers, but when a father ran to greet his son the actions directly undermined the system of honor, respect and status that was the foundation for daily life. The father kissed his son. Especially in the context of the Hebrew scriptures the father's kiss indicated forgiveness and a restoration of the relationship.

The father has restored one relationship to health. But *his elder son was in the field; and when the son came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.* And the older brother refused to participate in the celebration.

Notice that *His father came out and **began to plead** with him.* This is a powerful reversal. By our standards and theirs, it was the younger son who was supposed to plead his case with his father. But the father cut him off in the middle of the speech. The father refuses to let his younger son stay in a relationship of begging, but takes this role on himself, begging his older son to join in the celebration.

In the things that matter to Jesus, the older son's behavior is just as bad as the younger son. He attempts to break his relationships with his father and brother, referring to the young man as 'this son of yours'. He refuses to address his father as 'father'.

So this parable offers us several powerful sets of lenses for seeing the truth. We see the first set of lenses in the actions of the father. The father uses a set of lenses that filter out the unimportant parts of our relationships. The father is unconcerned that family structures and codes of honor prohibit him from running to greet his son. Jesus encourages us to use the same set of lenses, to filter out things that are keeping us from being in strong relationships with one another.

We see the second set of lenses in the actions of the younger son. These are the lenses of recovery. We constantly have the possibility of returning to relationships and love that are the foundations of our lives. Jesus' encourages us to be constantly engaged in the action of returning and recovering what is most important. Recalling that the younger son began his journey back home after he came to himself, Jesus encourages us to constantly be in the process of recovering our true selves by returning to God. Returning to God happens through the process of us being reconciled with our brothers and sisters.

The third and final set of lenses are the lenses of compassion and grace. I remember hearing this parable when I was seven or eight. I was certain at the time that I was like the older brother in the story. I was hard working. I did not spend my money on frivolous things. I stuck close to my father, and every time someone offered me a job feeding the pigs I said, "No thank you!"

There came a time in life, about twenty years later, when I felt like the younger brother. I had wandered far from the love and generosity shown by my parents. I had to find my way back home.

Now, as an older father, I often feel like the father in the story. My younger son is far away. He has made foolish decisions and broken many relationships. I would give anything for him to come home.

The parable teaches compassion because in your life you are all three of these characters. The truth is that if you live long enough you will have times in your life when you engage in the spontaneity and pleasures of life, like the younger son. You will have other times when you engage in the diligent work of the older son, like the older son. You will have other times when you respond with grace and generosity, like the father.

The truth is that if you live long enough you will have moments of shame, you will have feelings of righteous judgment, you will have feelings of joy and gratitude. The truth is that if you live long enough you will have times in your life when you hurt yourself and others by hastily withdrawing from a relationship. You will have times when you hurt yourself and others by refusing to join in the celebration to which you have been invited. You will have times when you hurt yourself and others by refusing to say 'no' to a request from someone you love.

Jesus encourages us to have compassion for one another and for ourselves, because, no matter who we are, or how hard we try, at some point in our lives each one of us will be the younger son, each one of us will be the older son, each one of us will be the father in the story. In this parable Jesus offers us a new set of lenses for seeing the world. Jesus encourages us to set aside the lenses of blame and judgment and view the world through lenses of compassion and grace. The sooner we acknowledge we **are** all three of these characters, the sooner we will live with compassion as the central feature of our lives.