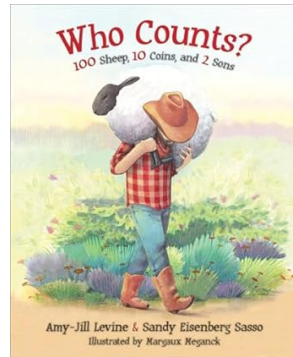


The title of a story can make a difference. In English, we know of today's parable as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" — which can be misleading by overfocusing on one character. In German, the parable is known as *Der verlorene Sohn*, "The Lost Son." This is better, especially if we can consider the older brother as a lost son, too. It also fits the two short parables we skipped over (Luke 15:4-10), about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

New Testament Professor Amy-Jill Levine has written a children's book about Luke 15 called *Who Counts?: 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons*. In a note to parents and teachers at the end, she sums up these three parables beautifully and simply:



In our reading, the three stories are connected. The first two stories set up the third. The main message is about counting, searching for what is missing, and celebrating becoming whole again. . . . [T]he father realizes that although his younger son has returned, he has lost his older son. The sheep is returned, and the coin is found. Whether the older son will recognize his father's love remains an open question.

When she says that the parables about "becoming whole again," we might think of our Second Reading today, where Paul says that our becoming human in the new creation is all about "reconciliation." That which is estranged, humankind, is becoming whole again. In this spirit, I would like to propose a little bit longer title for today's parable that captures the essence of what I think it is about:

The Parable of the Persistently Gracious and Loving Parent in Search of Her Persistently Lost and Estranged Children.

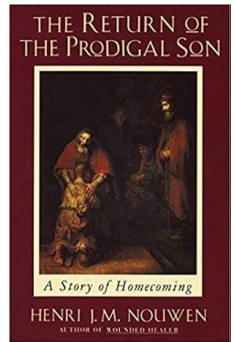
The two sons in the parable are lost in very different ways, but due to the same cause: Both sons fail to understand that their father is persistently loving and gracious. They seem to assume that their father doesn't have enough love, enough life, to support them both. They assume scarcity rather than abundance.

Doesn't this remind us of the pyramid of waealth we've talked about in recent weeks? Throughout our history humankind has become estranged by buying into the view of life of our authoritarian,

nationalistic leaders, that the gods designed human society as a pyramid of a few at the top, a great many in the middle, and those unfortunates at the bottom. So we sometimes act like younger siblings trying to get out from under those above us, and sometimes like older siblings trying to keep those below us in their places. We act lost in two ways but both because we fail to understand the true God's way of grace.

One of the great books on today's parable is by Henri Nouwen, titled after the inspiration of his book, namely, a painting by Rembrandt called "The Return of the Prodigal Son." I'd like to end this sermon with author John Dear's summary of how Nouwen came to write his book — which also acts as a summary of what we've been saying here:

For hundreds of years, people have studied the tale and reflected on the conversion of the prodigal son. Henri Nouwen did that too and spent a year reflecting on his life as the long-lost younger brother. But then one day, while he was sharing his meditation with a friend, the friend pointed out how Henri was more like the resentful older brother. Henri writes that it was a revelation to him. So he spent another year reflecting on the resentment, anger, and bitterness that churned within him. Finally, after he shared his reflections with [another friend], she said, "It doesn't matter whether you're more like the younger son or the older son; we need you to be like the compassionate father!" That was the final breakthrough for Henri. He realized that he, and all of us, are called to become as compassionate, loving, welcoming, forgiving, and merciful as the Father. This is Jesus's image of God, on the lookout for each of us, waiting for each of us, wanting to welcome us back home, hoping to throw a party for us, and pleading with us to turn back from our selfishness, to drop our anger, resentment, and bitterness, come back home, relax, and join the party.



We can ask ourselves, as Henri Nouwen did, Where are we in the story? Are we like the younger son, wasting our lives, far from God's home, lost and drifting toward death? How can we come to our senses and turn back to God? Are we like the older son — bitter, angry, resentful? How can we become as compassionate, loving, forgiving, and welcoming as the father? How do we celebrate when others come back to life? . . . What is our image of God, and, based on this story, what is God saying to us these days? . . . What keeps us from joining God's party? Why not swallow our pride, thank God, and celebrate? I hope we can all do the right thing and learn to repent, let go of our selfishness and resentments, welcome God's unconditional love and compassion, and rejoice, give thanks, and join God's ongoing celebration of life.