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We are exploring the Easter theme of God's Love, examining the question: Is there practical value in God's love?, i.e. is God's love real? If it is, can I experience it now, **and** live by it?

Lessons from Nicodemus' late night chat with Jesus, and Peter's last documented conversation with Jesus, both demonstrate the need to amend correct our misconceptions about ourselves, and our world-centred view of God, as a necessary first-step. A relationship is defined by the way two people behave with, and relate to each other; so does our relationship with God. Today we shall discover God's response to our steps of seeking and receiving emotional and spiritual healing.

Jesus restored Peter's confidence, preparing him to lead the Church; last Sunday we discovered how an incredibly wealthy, religious leader in high office, learned to deal with his prejudiced view of God, a view reinforced by the company he kept in the Sanhedrin.

On Thursday morning, someone asked whether Nicodemus' life changed as a result of his meeting with Jesus. First when Nicodemus defended Jesus against the Pharisees mocking¹, and then when he brought 75 lbs (32 kgs!) of embalming spices for Jesus' body², on both occasions John adds, "*Nicodemus, who met Jesus late one night*", showing a deeply committed man.

I have grappled with our passage for today³, for more than thirty years. I discovered my sermon and study notes going back to 1982, when I interpreted this passage, as most did and still do, as the return home of a wayward son, where a loving Father is waiting to welcome him back. I have heard many sermons describe in detail, the "*wild living*" of the wayward son, that that is not the focus of this parable.

¹ John 7:50-51

² John 19

³ Luke 15

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It wasn't until a person asked me, *I haven't indulged in any of these sin; is this passage of any relevance to me?*, that I started digging deeper in earnestness to discover what Jesus was teaching.

The scene is set at the start of chapter 14, *One Sabbath, Jesus went to eat dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, and the people were watching Him closely*, and ends with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in chapter 16 (Chapter 17 starts with, *One day Jesus ...* signifying a change of time and place)

Being Jesus, He challenged the social behaviour at the gathering: *Is it permitted to heal a person on the Sabbath? Is it appropriate to jockey for position to be seated at the High Table? What if someone of a higher social standing arrives after you have sat down; wouldn't you feel humiliated when the host asks you to move?* And so it went.

Luke describes further details, *Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to hear Jesus teach, which made the Pharisees and the teachers of religious law complain, Jesus was associating with such social scum, even eating with them.* Such people were spoiling (and culturally soiling) the pristine home of a well known Pharisee.

Luke then says, *So Jesus told them **this** story.* What follows as a **single**, complete story, in three parts - a trilogy, where one component depends on its predecessor to be understood and appreciated; so it is for us to find the threads which unify each component of this story.

The first part is the story about a shepherd who **has** one hundred sheep; the second part of the story is about a woman who **has** ten silver coins, and the third part of the story is about a Father who **has** two sons. 100 sheep **belong** to the shepherd; 10 coins **belong** to the woman, and 2 sons **belong** to the special Father.

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One of the shepherd's 100 sheep goes walk-about and is lost, exploring life in the other pasture which seems greener than the one she is grazing. She is lost, unable to find her way home.

Of the woman's 10 coins, which are normally resident in a safe place in the home, and expected to remain there, as coins don't have a mind of their own to roam around the house and get lost, but lost it is; the coin is lost to the woman.

Like the shepherd, this woman drops her household chores, lights a lamp and sweeps the entire house with the painstaking effort of a perfectionist, until she finds the lost coin.

Both the shepherd and the woman then invite their friends and neighbours to, *Rejoice with me for I have found my lost sheep / my lost coin.*

The narrative of the shepherd ends with, *There is great joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God, than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and have not strayed.*

The narrative of the woman ends with, *There is great joy in the presence of God's angels, when even one sinner repents.*

Jesus, the Master Story-teller is setting up the parable for its finale. Luke senses this and writes, *To illustrate this point further (the points in the first two parts), Jesus told them this story, one of those classic storytelling lines, "I told you that, in order to tell you this..."*

Although the story labelled, "*Parable of the Lost Son*" is a misnomer, referring to only *one* lost son, it does, however, build on the previous two, the shepherd and woman.

A man has two sons, the elder was the good boy who says of himself, *All these years I have slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you asked me to!* The younger felt ignored, didn't see much of a future at home and plotted, how he could enjoy life with his father's wealth.

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In asking his father for his share of the family's wealth, he wishes his father dead, because his inheritance would only come his way, at his father's death. This boy does not care for the family, nor for his father's reputation. The father does not stand in his way and converted the family's liquid assets to cash to give the younger lad an equal share of his inheritance.

This would have been a **HUGE** blow to the father's standing in society - *What kind of boy have you raised who wishes you dead?!* Some may have even offered money to the father, to avoid undue family hardship.

The lad leaves, squanders his inheritance with "wild living" (you can use your imagination!). When bad times hit the economy, not only does he have nothing left, but friends in the good times had abandoned him.

He remembers the servants in his father's house were well cared for, and decides to return home, if only to be one of the servants.

Now comes the story's first punch line. The last time the father saw the lad, he was healthy and walked out with the swagger of youth, but now, the father recognised the emaciated figure of his son, **while he was still a long way off**, a wonderful phrase which says, *His father recognised him when he was but a speck on the horizon*, and runs to greet him.

The two previous parables now come together. Like the shepherd who recognised his one lost sheep trying to find her way home, this father recognises his lost son returning home, runs to greet him and bring him home. While the son is saying his well prepared lines of repentance, the Father is instructing the servants to prepare the fattened calf for a big celebration.

Like the woman who found the coin lost in the house, this Father has to console a distraught elder son, lost in his own home, who bitterly complained, ***You never ever offered me even a kid goat to celebrate with my friends.***

This parable, this trilogy of stories is about the character of God; God who is hopelessly in love with His children, who is besotted with those who are lost,

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who is obsessed with wanting them back into the right father-child relationship He planned at the start, that all may enjoy the beauty and wonders of His heaven.

Some wilfully go their own way- *give me health and wealth and don't ask what I do with it*. Others beaver away at the tasks and chores God has given them, and when they see those who have squandered God's blessings, are forgiven their misdemeanours and restored into God's family, they are angry at God, that He has not treated them with the same generosity.

A human father would be an emotional wreck, on the one hand, looking out and hoping for the return of his wayward son, then celebrating his return home, and pleading with the other, ***Look dear son. You have always stayed by me; everything I have is yours to enjoy.***

The closing sentence of this third part of the trilogy, explains God's relief, ***Your brother wished me dead, but to us he as was as good as dead; now he has come back home, to life!***, a wonderful image of death away from God, and life in the company and presence of God.

Then comes the real punch line which ties in the three parts of the trilogy: ***He was lost, but now he is found!***

This parable is about God's passion for the lost. One son is lost in the world, and the other son is lost in his own home. The younger son who thought the joy of living was outside his father's home, and the elder son who never enjoyed life in his father's home, both need to realise, the joy of life in their Father's home, in His presence.

The Father's love is real here and now, if only we would spend time with him and learn the riches of His glory are for us to enjoy, in our Father's presence, in His home.

AMEN.