

“WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE? III – THE GOSPEL OF LUKE”

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Luke 15:1-32

A couple of times this week I had conversations about Bibles. One was when someone asked me about what version of the Bible to buy for a United Methodist. The other was in a conversation I had with Jonathan Baker at Annual Conference about buying Bibles for the students with whom he works in the Democratic Republic of Congo. (You’ll be hearing more about that later – it’s very exciting!)

But, having both of those conversations within the span of a couple of days brought back to my mind a conversation I had with one of my brothers a number of years ago – a conversation I think I have shared with you before. I had called him on the phone to ask him a very unique question. And here’s why it was unique. This particular brother is a non-believer, even though he was raised in the church. But he’s also a very thoughtful person and a deep thinker, and I needed his opinion on something.

So I called him, and said that a parishioner had bought a Bible for a friend who was going through tough times and wanted to make a list of suggested readings for that person. That person amazingly had never had a Bible or even read from the Bible. So I made a list of readings – at the top was the 23rd Psalm.

I called my brother to see what he thought of my choices, and boy, am I glad I did. He told me flat out that I had made a bad first choice – that, in his opinion, the 23rd Psalm shouldn’t even be on the list – and here’s why. The psalm talks about the Lord makes me lie down, he leads me, and so on – and for a seeker or unbeliever, that’s scary – they’re not ready for that.

Do you know what passage was at the top of his list? Luke’s story of the Prodigal Son! Why? Because that son ran away and did all sorts of bad things, and even so, his father came running out to greet him and welcome him home with open arms. That, my brother said, is what a seeker or non-believer needs to here – that no matter what, you can be welcomed home again.

I will never forget that conversation – and that friends, in a nutshell, is much of what Luke is about – welcoming everyone, especially the lost. But before I get to that, let me, as I have done in the previous two sermons in this series, give you some facts about Luke and his gospel.

It was written in the late first century, probably around 85-90. The authorship of Luke, as was the authorship of Mark, is widely debated. Many scholars today simply say they don't know who the author was. But tradition, as many of you know, says that Luke was a physician, and a companion of Paul. (Isn't it interesting that Mark was with Peter, and now Luke with Paul?)

At any rate, this same author also wrote the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and as a result, his writing makes up fully one quarter of the entire New Testament. You'll remember that Matthew wrote his gospel for the Jews, while Mark wrote for the Gentiles. Luke's Gospel is not for a specific people per se, but for a specific purpose – and he lays it out in the very first verses of the gospel.

He says that others have recorded these things, but there has been a lot of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, so he wants to set things straight. The preface to the Gospel of Luke in the *Discipleship Study Bible* explains what Luke did very well:

“Luke’s audience was not new to the teachings of the Jesus movement. The gospel’s readers have already been instructed in the basic story of Jesus. His gospel is not aimed at getting new proselytes, but at illumining and strengthening the faith of those already within the believing community.”

And the other big reason he wrote his gospel was to counteract the belief that Jesus was a revolutionary at odds with the Roman government. That was a growing notion at the time, and so Luke wrote to let people know that was patently untrue. Jesus may have been counter-cultural, but he was not anti-government, and Luke speaks to that in his gospel.

There are lots and lots of interesting things about the gospel of Luke. I told the staff the other day that I was kind of sad that I had to preach about Luke on a communion Sunday, because there was so much great stuff to talk about. Oh well, I'll do my best.

Here are some of those interesting things about Luke:

- Like Matthew, Luke includes a genealogy, but notice something very different between the two. Matthew takes the genealogy back to Abraham (remember he's talking to the Jews and pressing the point of Jesus' Jewish roots). Luke takes the genealogy all the way back to Adam. Why? To say that Jesus is the Son of God from the very beginning.
- Another interesting thing Luke includes that no other gospel writer does is a mention of Jesus in his boyhood. Luke's is the only thing you'll find in

any gospel about Jesus beyond his birth and early years until his adulthood. Luke talks about an incident when Jesus was 12.

- Luke's gospel talks about a few things more than the other gospels – things like food (he mentions a lot of meals), diagnoses (not surprising since he was a doctor), the Holy Spirit, money and possessions, and the role of women in Jesus' life and world. Over and over again, Luke names women and tells women's stories.

But I think one of the most precious things about Luke is what I want to call “the lost stories” - the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son (better known as the Prodigal Son) – for in and through those stories, Luke tells us what Jesus is all about, and in fact, how Jesus wants us to be as well.

Jesus came, Luke said, that all might come to God – all, not just some, but all. And he especially had a heart for those on the outside, those who were struggling, those whom others cast aside, those who were lost. Thus, Luke's stories – about God being like a woman searching for that lost coin, and searching for the one sheep out of a hundred who had wandered away, and the Father who runs out to greet a son who had basically used him and squandered everything.

And Luke not only told these stories about Jesus, but what he was saying was that, as disciples of that same Jesus, we are called to live the same way. That's what I mean by Jesus being counter-cultural. You see, our world would not necessarily agree with what that father did with his prodigal son, and truth be told, don't we have a hard time understanding it?

I mean, think about it. The young son took his inheritance way ahead of time, basically snubbed his nose at his father and home, and took off to live a wild and crazy life for a while. He blew everything he had and more.

Meantime, the elder son, stayed at home with his father, did everything he was supposed to do and probably more, since his wayward brother had taken off, and now, that younger son comes back and the father not only runs out to welcome him with open arms and forgives him – but he also throws a party.

Now, what's fair about that? I don't know about you, but I think we tend to think of ourselves as the older brother in the story, and it's hard to stomach what the father did. It's not fair!

Perhaps if we saw ourselves as the younger son, we would see that it may not be fair, but it's life-saving, it's life-changing, it's grace, pure and simple. Unmerited, undeserved – grace – and oh, how we all need it.

That's Luke's picture of Jesus Christ – a Savior come from God to change the world by turning convention upside down in favor of love, grace and breaking down boundaries that divide. And a Savior that asks the same of us – his disciples.

It's not an easy life, Jesus never said it would be. But it's the kind of living that is real and authentic and transforms not only lives, but has the potential to change the world.

So let me close with a little story of how one life was changed. It's a story told by the great preacher Fred Craddock. "Years ago, in a small town in West Tennessee, a baby boy was born out of wedlock. As he grew up, life was tough for him. Some children were not allowed to play with him. He was shunned on the playgrounds. People whispered behind his back and called him ugly names. He felt rejected and worthless and lonely. However, on his own, when he got to high school, he started going to church. People were nice to him, but he felt self-conscious, so he stayed in the background."

"But then one Sunday morning, as he was leaving the sanctuary, he heard the pastor call his name. He stopped and turned to hear the pastor say those words he had come to dread: 'Whose boy are you, anyway?' The young man froze in place, felt his whole body tense up, and wished that he could disappear. But then the pastor said, 'Hey, I know who you are! I know who you belong to! I can see it now. I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God. I can tell by the way you act that you are close kin to God.'"

"The boy was speechless. The pastor put his big hands on the boy's shoulders and said to him, 'Son, you have a great heritage. Now you go out there into the world and claim it.'"

You know what? That incident changed that boy's life. Where previously he had felt like an outsider, a nobody, suddenly he felt like he had a new identity, a sense of worth and purpose. And as the person who told his story said, "Because he felt so loved by God, he stopped waiting around for others to love him. He started reaching out to others. Later, he became a great governor of the state of Tennessee, because that day he realized that God loves us unconditionally, forgives us unreservedly, and celebrates us unashamedly." (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 156-157 and James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It*, p. 14-15)

My friends, that sounds a whole lot like the message contained in the Gospel of Luke. Thanks be to God for His love in Christ that seeks us out, draws us in, and grants us grace. May we do the same in His name! May it be so. Amen.