

Luke 15: 1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying: “ This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 So Jesus told them this parable: 11 “There was a man who had two sons. 12 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 property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout the country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said: ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him: ‘Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’

20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 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.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves: ‘Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied: ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father: ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who had devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father said to him: ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

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LOSS AND RESTORATION

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT gives an ecological reading of the parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15:11-32.

We are so very familiar with the parable we call *The Prodigal Son* that it is challenging to read it with fresh eyes. When we read it ecologically we bring new perspectives, new reading lenses to the narrative so that we look at Earth, the material, the other-than-human as these intersect with the human.

The three opening verses set the scene for Jesus’s preaching through three parables. First is the shepherd and his lost sheep (Lk 15:4-7), next, the widow and her lost



coin (Lk 15:8-10) and then the father who loses a son, or perhaps two (Luke 15:11-32). The context is significant. Tax collectors and sinners are seeking Jesus to hear what he has to say while Pharisees and scribes are complaining that he not only teaches but welcomes sinners and eats with them. Our attention is drawn to the human characters and their interrelationships. And in this context the parable begins: “A man had two sons . . .”

The parable focuses the reader on “the younger” son who requests the “share of the estate” that would come to him, his material inheritance which preempts the death of his father. The material and the social are intimately interconnected in the negotiations but

we do not hear of the implications for the father and his older son. We hear only that the younger one gathers together all his material possessions and leaves for a distant country. He has fractured the family — its material and social fabric — and he is left with only “his share of the estate”.

That fracture finds expression in his going to a “distant country” and his squandering of his inheritance in what the parable calls “dissolute living”. He is without both a “right place” and right relationships with the material realities necessary for survival and for living with the human community. All have broken down, the material as well as the social. An ecological reading invites us to consider both as integrally related to our wellbeing, integrally related in the son who is totally abandoned — “no one offered him anything”.

This young man has, however, a memory of his previous life in his father’s house where both material and social resources abounded. There was an abundance of food for the household — “no one was in want”. It must also have been a place of acceptance and love so that he is able to decide to return to his father and to confess that he has sinned “against heaven and against you”. With our tendency to focus on the human community, it is easy for us to miss the reference to sinning against heaven. The son’s actions have torn not only the social fabric but also the ecological — both will need to be restored.

As the parable unfolds, that social and ecological restoration becomes apparent. The son is a long way off from his father’s household when he is seen. Material distance does not, however, equate with emotional distance. The father is moved with compassion, moved in the depth of his being at the approach of his son. When father and son are reunited, the father “clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly”. The material, the bodily manifestation of the father’s welcoming love is so overwhelming that he does not attend to the son’s protestation of guilt. Instead, he “clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly”. Again the material, the bodily, manifests

the emotional: “This son of mine was dead and has come back to life, he was lost and is found”. And the words find expression in actions and we are drawn into a material and social world: that of the best robe, a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. It is a time of celebration and the material contributes to such a celebration.

But another note is struck, however, and another material and social world evoked. It is that of the elder brother who is “out in the fields” — indicating a work context which contributes to the household economy. As the son makes his way home, he hears the music and dancing, the sounds of celebration, and when he enquires he discovers that his long lost brother has returned and his father has ordered a household feast. The material and the social continue to intersect — and in amongst this stands the angry elder brother. He challenges his father speaking of his faithful contribution to the household over “many years”. And in loving response his father indicates the material and social worlds that he shares with his father: all the material elements of the estate are his.

Jesus does not “complete” the story. Indeed it is a parable that evokes our engagement with the unfolding threads. We are not told if the elder son joins the feast to celebrate his brother’s return. Does he feast and dance with the rest of the household and rejoice? We do not know. What we have seen, however, is that a parable is drawn from the experience of the human community: a father, his two sons and his household. The material world of estates, food and food production (or lack of such as in famine) engages us as readers. Parables are full of material details — it is through these details that we are able to develop an ecological awareness. This awareness will enable us to read both old and new life situations ecologically. ☉

Painting: *The Return of the Prodigal*
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