

Good morning

Many of you know that I am a farmer, since many of you have dropped off and picked up children and youth at our farm over the years for various youth events. Today our farm is a grain operation, but some of you may not know that until 2009 we were also a commercial hog operation.

There is one bible story that I felt I could not speak on all the years that we were hog farmers, and that is the story that Jesus told about the Prodigal Son or the Lost Son, as the New International Version entitles it. We will get into some details later, but at one point, the son finds himself in such desperate straits, that he finds work with a local pig farmer. This young man was so hungry, that the gospel writer Luke records in [Luke 15:16,17a](#), “he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything”. It is v 17 that constrained me from speaking about this story. It begins, “When he came to his senses”. The problem was, that if I was feeding hogs, I obviously had not come to my senses yet, and until I stopped feeding pigs, I couldn’t speak on this story.

We no longer feed pigs. Whether or not I have come to my senses, I will leave you to be the judge of that.

Many of us know this story, and we will go through it, but we have become so accustomed to hearing it that I think we miss out on the revulsion that the Hebrew listeners felt as they listened to it. This revulsion was made real to me about 20 years ago. Marg and I had the privilege of journeying to a very conservative area of an Islamic nation. People we knew well were working in a city there, and so we grabbed an opportunity to go visit them. It was an incredible privilege to be there. Life there was very different from our normal, but it was the normal of the people there, and it was so great to be there.

Immediately upon our arrival, our host said to me, “Larry, I don’t care how many lies we have to tell, but you cannot under any circumstances, admit that you are a pig farmer.” We were grain growers then as well, so we could talk about the farm and grain, but we could not admit that we raised hogs. Our hosts said the people around them would not even say the word pork. It was the “forbidden meat”. It was then I began to clue in to the impact Jesus had on the Hebrew listeners to this story.

I am not a student of Jewish or Moslem cultures, and so, I do not want to draw any similarity between Islamic and Mosaic laws. The Mosaic law made no allowance for the consumption of pork. [Leviticus 11:7,8](#) says “the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud, it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.” If these cultures see the pig as that unclean, for Jesus to choose the pigpen as the place where the Jewish young man ends up in our story, Jesus was trying to make a point. And what was that point?

That is the question I want to address. We have had over 2000 years of listening to these bible stories, to sterilize, sanitize, and desensitize ourselves to them and I think we have lost the impact they had on the listeners in Jesus’ day. I have not been able to think of anything in our culture that would cause people to feel as offended, or revolted as the listeners to Jesus felt the day he told this story.

I think the point Jesus was wanting to make is that his love for all people, and the grace and forgiveness he extends to all, transcends all the mess we can get caught up in as humans. We may have all kinds of Scripture to back up our perspectives on whether Jesus’ love can include this or that group of people, but the reality is Jesus emphasized 2 Old Testament commands as being the most important. [Deut 6:5](#)

and Lev 19:18b Loving God with everything we have, and loving our neighbour as ourself. Jesus said, all other commands come under the umbrella of these 2 commands.

Let's look at the story. I love to tell bible stories, because to quote Anne Shirley of Anne of Green Gables, there is always so much "scope for imagination." So for today's journey into this story, allow me to assume the character of one of the religious leaders listening to Jesus tell this story. This leader will remain nameless, he is just someone listening.

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This rabbi, Jesus, is attracting quite sizable followings everywhere he goes. This is somewhat understandable, because unique things happen everywhere he goes. Blind people have their sight restored, deaf people can hear, and lame and paralyzed can walk. There is even the odd account of him raising someone back to life from the dead. There are some accounts of him feeding huge crowds of people, creating food it seems out of thin air. One such account has him feeding a crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children, all from a little boy's lunch of 2 small buns and 5 small fish. So yes, it is understandable how people are attracted to him.

The problem is that Jesus seems to be willing to run roughshod over the traditions of our people. The traditions that are all based on the Scriptures and writings that we the religious leaders of the people have been guarding and making practical ever since Moses started writing things down, a couple of thousand years ago.

God gave Moses 10 commands which are a fairly straight forward list. And then in further writings Moses expanded on these commands as needed. For example, when God said, 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy', what does that mean? No work on the Sabbath, okay, but what is work and what is necessary that cannot be put off until the next day? Babies need cleaning each day of the week, and that cannot be put off, but doing the household laundry, that must wait.

Ever since Moses gave us the Levitical law, we the leaders of the people have been interpreting what it means. These discussions have happened at city gates, and in the local synagogues. As people come to the leaders with their issues, the leaders resolve them. If there isn't clear scriptural or legal guidance for the resolution needed, the leaders discuss and research. Sometimes they have to take this or that local issue to higher authority. This is something Moses put in place. At first, when Moses led our people to freedom from Egypt's enslavement, he was the sole arbiter of justice. But Jethro, Moses' father-in-law saw how inefficient it was for the people and how taxing it was for Moses. Jethro suggested to Moses, that Moses should appoint leaders over groups of 10 and 100 and 1000 and so on. Minor issues could be dealt with by the leader of the 10. But if the issue was too difficult, they could take it to higher authority. If the issue was thorny enough, then it came to Moses' attention. And if it was too difficult for Moses to deal with, he could take it up with God, because Moses regularly communicated with God directly.

This is the system that we still operate under. Even though at this present time, we are under Roman occupation, our Hebrew traditions and laws still govern our day-to-day existence. This system has worked for many hundreds of years and while it is not perfect, it works. Why does this Jesus have to mess with it? Not only is Jesus willing to mess with our traditions, he seems intent on insulting us, the religious leaders, whenever we have strong difference of opinion with him.

His interpretations of the Sabbath law are particularly troubling. He is perfectly willing to heal on the Sabbath. Now we understand that if someone has suffered a significant injury and is bleeding, attempting to stop the blood loss is appropriate. But someone who has been lame from birth, or is blind or has been suffering from leprosy for many years, or who has a withered hand since birth, what does it matter if they wait until the day after the Sabbath? [Matt 12:11,12](#) But no, Jesus first asks some difficult question like, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?"

Well duh, of course we would lift it out. The sheep might perish if left there till the day after the Sabbath. But Jesus then goes on to say, "How much more valuable is the man than a sheep. Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Yes, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, but why can't this healing wait till the day after the Sabbath? Why does Jesus have to push the boundaries so hard?

Another thing, Jesus does not seem to notice, or care, when all kinds of people crowd up to him. It isn't like he doesn't know what or who is touching him and looking for his noticing. There are so many instances when Jesus will look at someone and know exactly who they are and what they are thinking. We have to assume that Jesus knows it is commoners, tax collectors and many other such sinners crowding around him, but it does not seem to trouble him. It certainly troubles us. On this particular day, I can hear my colleagues muttering around me that this Jesus welcomes sinners and even shares a meal with them. How low will he stoop?

As I think this, Jesus looks over at our gathering of religious leaders and begins to tell a story. It is about a shepherd losing a sheep. The shepherd realizes this at the evening's counting and goes back into the night to find the lost sheep, having first ensured that the rest of the flock is safe. Well, that makes sense. Any self-respecting shepherd would do the same. But his conclusion digs at us. Jesus says, "There would be more rejoicing over the one sinner who is rescued than over the rest of the flock who don't need rescuing." What is that supposed to mean? We, who have kept ourselves pure and clean all of our lives, we will certainly welcome a sinner into our midst, after they have followed all the rituals about cleansing and after they have demonstrated that they too are willing to live a pure life. We have welcomed many this way. But to suggest that heaven rejoices over one sinner's rescue more than heaven rejoices at all of us? That is low.

Another story? This one is about some woman losing a coin, searching her house, finding said coin, and then throwing a party, and possibly spending the coin on the party. This doesn't make much sense. You lose a coin, stress out, find the coin, and then blow the coin on a party? Why not just accept the coin as lost and get on with life? Again, Jesus' point digs at us. Jesus says the angels rejoice over 1 sinner who repents.

Jesus seems to be on a roll. A third story follows hard on the heels of the first 2. The story begins with a father and his 2 sons. Many of us have sons, and inheritance struggles and succession occupies many of our conversations as leaders. Our tradition holds that the oldest son receives a double portion as compared to any of his male siblings, but that inheritance always waits till Dad passes away. But in this story Jesus tells, the younger son comes to the dad and cruelly says, "Dad I want my share now." What? What self respecting well raised Hebrew son would even dream of asking for his inheritance from his still living dad? [Deut 21:18-21](#) Levitical law allows that if parents have a stubborn and rebellious son, they

can force him before the local court, accuse the son of rebellion and that son could be summarily executed.

Is that what this father does? No! Jesus says the father gives the son his share and lets him go. We as leaders and businessmen all know it isn't that easy. Nobody has the cash in hand to just give to their son. This cash is tied up in hard assets, in land and in business ventures. So, before the father can give this ungrateful wretch of a son the share he so unjustly demands, the father has to sell 1/3 of his business interests. Why 1/3 you ask? Well, Jesus said the man has 2 sons, and if the oldest gets a double portion, that means 2 sons, equals 3 portions, 2 for the older son, 1 for the younger. Therefore, the father has to sell 1/3 of his business. Talk about a crippling impact to any well-run business.

Jesus continues. The son takes the money and runs. If the kid would at least invest the funds and be a bit entrepreneurial. But no, he takes the money and blows it on really bad life choices. We don't even have to look for scripture to talk about the lack of wisdom shown here, but if you want scriptures, the writers in Proverbs have lots to say about this. This kid obviously is not particularly blessed with intelligence. What is Jesus' point with this story?

Eventually the money runs out. Hardly surprising, and there is a severe famine in this place, so the kid goes looking for work. He hires himself out to a farmer who sends him out to look after his... WHAT? His p-p-p, I can't even bring myself to repeat the name of this horrible, unclean, filthy disgusting animal. I realize some cultures around us do eat the meat of this creature, but it is in the list of unclean animals that God forbade us to eat ever since the time of Moses. No self-respecting Hebrew, I don't care how hungry, is going to hire himself out to look after them. How low is this story going to go? This is horrible!!

This kid now discovers his job does not come with a meal plan and he is considering eating what these filthy creatures are eating? Gross.

Now his brain finally begins to work and he thinks, even his father's servants have it better than he does. He has blown it, but maybe his dad will hire him on as a servant. So, he journeys homeward. First smart move this kid has made.

But Jesus says the dad is looking down the road. Why? This kid doesn't deserve this. Has the father been standing at the end of the driveway all day, every day looking down the road? For how long? He should be paying attention to his business. After he downsized it to give this wretched son his share of the inheritance, he should be rebuilding it with every ounce of his energy. This kid should be disowned and forgotten about. Dad should not be staring down the road looking for the kid. What a waste of time!!

Jesus says the father spots the kid on the road and, NO!! This is unbelievable. The father runs toward the son. Hebrew men don't run. If in a hurry, one might walk fast, but to lift your robes, show your legs and run. Outrageous. Especially to run towards this ungrateful wretch.

As he gets near the kid, the kid begins his speech, the father ignores the speech, grabs the kid and hugs him.

How could he? This kid is unclean. Not just filthy, grimy, and smelly from his sojourn in that unspeakable creature's pen at his last job. He is ceremonially unclean. This kid has walked and been intimate with all kinds of Gentiles. Even ignoring his last job in that awful place, the people he hung out with would make him completely unfit to enter any synagogue or place of worship until he has brought the appropriate sacrifices, AND HAD A BATH. For this father to even touch him, let alone hug him, means the father is ceremonially unclean as well and will have to go through the same cleansing process before the father can enter a synagogue. What is the father thinking? This kid should be disowned. It is possible that he could be hired back as a servant, but certainly not welcomed with a hug.

This story just keeps getting worse and worse. The father hurries the son back towards the family home. As soon as the father is within earshot, he calls for servants to fetch the best robe and even a ring. And, to welcome this filthy unclean kid back into the family, Dad is throwing a party. Despicable.

Surely the story is done now. The first 2 stories ended with a party, maybe this horror is complete. But no, it is not. The older son, who we have heard nothing from in this whole disaster, hears the revelry and comes to the house from where he was in the field. He asks servants what is going on and they say Dad is throwing a party for the younger brother who has bothered to come home with his tail between his legs.

The older son won't even go into the house. Ah, finally someone with some sense. The father comes out and the older son asks why the party? The older son, with passion and anger, unloads about the unfairness of it all. This younger son, who wished his father dead, who forced dad to downsize his business, took all that hard earned cash and blew it on fast living, now is back and dad is throwing him a party? Older brother says, dad has never thrown a party for me and I have been here working hard the whole time.  
"Life's not fair".

The father replies with something that makes no sense. Dad says, but your brother was lost and is now found. So?

What is Jesus' point with this story? The older son is correct. His foolish younger brother deserves nothing. Hardly even to be acknowledged and yet here he is, the focal point of the feast and given the seat of honour. We don't even know whether this kid took a bath before the party.

The first 2 stories ended with this phrase 'of heaven rejoicing over 1 sinner repenting'. This story ends with a party for the 1 sinner, this fool of a kid coming back, and the older brother not lowering himself to attend the party.

All 3 of these stories are directed at us, the religious leaders. We who guard the holiness and uprightness of the faith. We don't take this guarding lightly. We use the Scriptures to guide our traditions. Is Jesus suggesting that we, we the leaders are in error? How can that be? Are we supposed to forgo the writings of Moses and of the many leaders and rabbis who came after Moses? Are we supposed to ignore the traditions that have guided us, that have helped us to define right and wrong?

Is Jesus actually suggesting that when confronted with the tension between a person's actions and the scriptural admonitions, that sometimes the person is more important?

Is Jesus suggesting that the older son, who obviously exhibited the only common sense in this whole sordid tale, that the older son is wrong? Is Jesus daring to suggest that we who have been tasked with the spiritual leadership of the people, we who hold to the traditions of the forefathers, we who are so careful to observe the minutiae of the law, that we might be in error?

But this Jesus welcomes sinners and tax collectors and eats with them. These are unclean people. These are people sullied thru their contact with others. How dare Jesus suggest that our perspective is incorrect? How dare he?

Allow me to leave the story telling there.

I think the point of these stories in Luke is, Jesus is cautioning those of us who are his followers. We should not allow our traditions, our issues with someone's culture, or our issues with whatever, even if we can find scriptural backing for our perspective, to ever stand in the way of someone experiencing the love and grace of our Saviour.

Tom Loewen, last Sunday referenced the people who tried to shush blind Bartimaeus when he called to Jesus to heal him. Jesus asked those same people to summon Bartimaeus and bring him to Jesus.

Jesus is a Saviour who does not build kingdom in a way that we would build a business. He is building an upside-down kingdom. He reaches out to the hurting, those on the margins, to those looking for healing.

Jesus is a Saviour who leaves the 99 in the safety of the sheep fold and goes after the one, even if the 99 may not be happy about it.

Jesus is a Saviour who rejoices with all of heaven when 1 lost coin is found, or 1 lost daughter or son returns.

Jesus is a Saviour who would rather be killed by his enemies than see harm come to them.

Jesus is a Saviour who was completely comfortable to allow a sex trade worker to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair as an expression of her grateful love for him because she was so overwhelmed by his forgiving love for her.

Our Saviour is as radical today as he was when he walked this earth, over 2000 years ago.

Jesus is a Saviour who loves recklessly.

Let's be careful not to shush people, and do all we can to keep the way clear for all to experience this same love.

Let's pray