

Sermon Notes: March 30, 2025

Focus: The Prodigal Son in context

[Lectionary Readings](#)

I want to look at three related parables in Luke 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Today's reading gives us the punchline of the series—the lost son, also known as the prodigal son. All three parables were told because “sinners” and tax collectors were listening to Jesus intently. That had to sting the religious elite, especially for those who expected the underclass to fawn over them. I am not going to retell the parables here. Please read all of Luke 15 for full context and content.

The Message, a biblical paraphrase, captures the mood before the parables well:

“The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, ‘He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.’”

Jesus always welcomed sinners, treating them like old friends. I used to think he deliberately centered his ministry on the non-elite, but the older I get, the more I wonder if he simply didn't care who listened if they were listening and applying what he taught. He knew that sinners would invite sinners into the movement, and he wasn't afraid of a crowd full of both patricians and plebeians if dignity was an unbroken boundary. His vision was big enough for all of it.

The three-parable package in Luke 15—the sheep, the coin, and the son—is Jesus' response to the criticism that he kept company with the wrong people:

The lost sheep – Of course, you go after a lost sheep. Any good rancher would.
And when you find it? *Celebrate.*

The lost coin – Who wouldn't check the couch cushions for a \$100 bill?
And when you find it? *Celebrate.*

The lost son – Here, Jesus pushes the boundary. A father welcomes back his wayward younger son to displeasure of the older —just as Jesus welcomes those who are eager to hear him to the displeasure of the elite.

And when a son comes home? *Party.*

I imagine Jesus shaking his head in near disbelief. People were finding freedom and joy because of him, yet his critics were angry. They were angry not because of the message, but because he was blowing their cover. Their status was built on holiness-as-exclusion. They weren't seeking freedom; they were guarding a religious caste system. Are *we* invested in guarding a religious caste system?

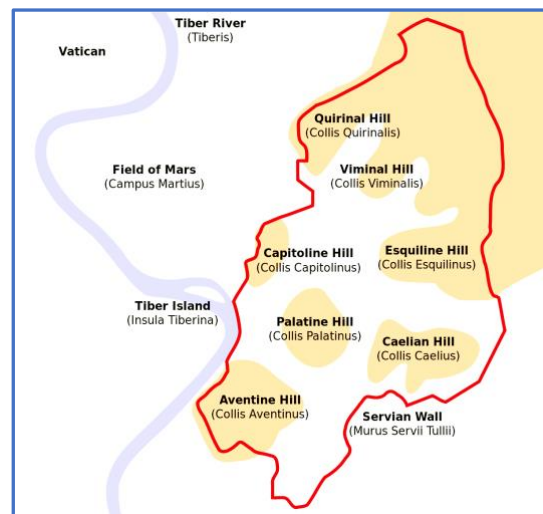
Pomerium and the first centuries of Christianity Early Christianity took this ethic of welcoming and applied it in ways that would have shocked old Roman sensibilities. Rome, the city itself, had a sacred boundary, the pomerium, marking where the city's holiness ended and the chaotic, demon-filled world began. It is the root of the myth of how the city was created.

Only the strong and pure belonged inside. The disabled, the broken, the elderly, not inside. But Christianity turned this idea on its head.

In the Jesus movement, death led to life. The weak didn't sully the strong. Outsiders didn't threaten the elite's call to follow him. Over time, this "heresy" took root—so much so that Christians buried their dead *inside* the city, in catacombs that became places of worship. What was once weak became strong.

Jesus' parables weren't just about kindness. They were a revolution in belonging and dignity and that revolution is still unfolding.

Maps are always fun. The eternal city was seven hills encircled by the holy boundary



Today We live in a paradox of tolerance. We may want everyone to express themselves freely, but what happens when that expression is rooted in denying other people's right to exist or move freely in society? Jesus did not "tolerate" the religious elite dominating public discourse and dehumanizing so-called sinners.

I really valued the idea of unfettered expression. A core plank of this belief rested on the ACLU going to court to defend a Skokie, Illinois Nazi group's right to rally 1978. Fast forward to present day, this high-minded value is tested when masked, armed Nazi's are picking fights with random people two blocks from my daughter's dorm in Ohio.

Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, explores the limits of tolerance. **A useful metaphor is a playground:** imagine a space where everyone is welcome—as long as they follow basic rules like no pushing and no stealing toys. Then, a kid shows up and declares, "I don't believe in these rules. I should be allowed to push people and take their toys!"

If that kid is allowed to stay and act any way they want, they will ruin the playground for everyone else. The other kids will either leave or be forced to play by the bully's rules. Without boundaries on behavior, the playground ceases to be a place of fairness and fun; it becomes a place where might makes right.

To keep the playground safe, you may have to remove the child who refuses to follow the basic rules. This is the paradox of intolerance: a society (or playground) that tolerates the intolerant—those who refuse to respect the dignity of others—can end up losing tolerance altogether. To protect fairness and kindness, there must be limits.

Disagreement is not intolerance. Denying basic human rights is. This is why we tolerate intolerance to our peril. Long before Popper, Jesus embodied this principle. He freely associated across social boundaries, yet he was strong enough to draw a firm boundary of dignity—one he refused to let be violated. In the parable of the prodigal son, dignity was the coin of the realm valued far beyond the older son's indignant response.

Todd