

Some of you may be familiar with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. He wrote about a fictional race of people called Hobbits, or occasionally known as halflings, because there were about half average human height. Tolkien presented hobbits as a variety of humanity, or close relatives thereof. They lived barefooted, and lived in homely underground houses. Their feet had naturally tough leathery soles (so that they did not need shoes) and were covered on top with curly hair. The Hobbits first appeared in the 1937 children's novel *The Hobbit*.

The Hobbits had an interesting custom. On a hobbit's birthday, he or she does not receive gifts from family and friends. Instead, the birthday-celebrating hobbit presents gifts—and perhaps throws a party—for all of his or her family and friends. Now this might appear to be an unappealing practice. “What? *My* birthday and *I* go to the trouble and expense of gifts and a party for everyone else? This is supposed to be *my* day to celebrate and be celebrated!” But, stop and think about what this means in terms of the total number of birthday gifts and parties a hobbit participates in every year. Instead of celebrating a birthday—“my birthday”—only once a year, the hobbit celebrates birthdays many times a year, in fact on each and every day a loved one has a birthday.

That birthday custom might suggest that the hobbits would understand very well the famous Gospel story we usually call the parable of the Prodigal Son. As Jesus tells it, a prosperous landowner has two sons. The younger can not wait until Dad dies before he gets his inheritance. Despite the insult, the father gives the younger son his share of the family property. The youngest runs off to some sort of first-century Vegas, squanders it all, and ends up eating beans and mush alongside the hogs he is feeding. Then he decides that he might return home—even if his

father will not take him back as a son and treats him like a hired hand—it will be better than this.

So home he goes. He is braced for humiliation. However as he comes over the hill in sight of his hometown, his father runs to greet him with open arms. This is something a Palestinian Jewish patriarch would never have done! The father's response to his son's return—the kissing, the gift of a robe and ring, the banquet—was most out of character for someone who had been publicly shamed by his son.

The feast that was arranged was a spectacular party—a shindig of biblical proportions! It was also something that was necessary to repair the damage caused by the son to his neighbors. They would have regarded his behavior as undermining traditional values and setting a terrible example. The banquet probably served as a way to ease the younger son back into the good graces of the neighbors.

The story could have ended right there. It would seem that Jesus wants to tell us that the kingdom of God is like a birthday party. You or I or he or she or they or them comes back to God, and God celebrates a return for each one of us. Not too shabby! But Jesus does not end the story there. He brings the elder son back into the picture.

He was consumed by jealousy and resentment. He has slaved away, day after day, year after year, and his father has never even tossed a goat-party for him and a few of his buddies. He is mad!

But, just as the father reached out to his younger son who was lost, so too did he reach out to the elder son, who was in danger of becoming just as lost as his brother. The father abandoned his

guests, which was a breach of etiquette, in order to persuade his older son to rejoice at his brother's return. At this point, the parable ends. We do not know if the elder son came to accept his father's response to his younger brother's return.

Even though this story is a familiar one, its power increases each time we hear it. You've no doubt heard it preached a number of times—but perhaps we might pick up something we missed before. John Stendahl sees it as the son making himself an alien—leaving his home and his own country and becoming a stranger in a strange land. He views the older brother as an alien also, making himself an alien in his own home, by remaining outside and refusing to be restored to his brother.

Does make one think in this season of Lent, in what ways that we might feel alienated from all that is going on around us, perhaps even from those we hold most dear? How might we have contributed to that sense of alienation? If Lent is a time of repentance, of turning back, how can we find our way back home again?

Or perhaps we might think of the experience of being dead and then restored to life; the son, the father says, “was dead and has come to life,” but he's not the only one. The father, too, is restored to life, as parents in all ages are when their children come home. The father, “*rejected and helpless in love with his child,*” experiences a kind of resurrection in his son's return, Stendahl writes. We all know that Lent leads to Easter; so what is the resurrection we long for in this season? Where are the dead places, the lifeless experiences, the heavy burdens that create a road block for new life?

But perhaps the most compelling image is that of being lost and then found. Is it any wonder that we love to sing it in “Amazing Grace”?

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

If we begin with the very start of the scripture—there Jesus is—eating with sinners and tax collectors. They are not just innocent folks on the margins of society, rejected and alone. They were folks who evoked this sort of gut reaction from those who had made “better” choices, or indeed, had even had the privilege of making choices about their lives. Tax collectors weren’t simply government officials who contributed to the workings of society.

They were seen as traitors working with the hated Romans while they were separating folks from their money. Sinners were people who were outside the “proper” and “acceptable” community because they had violated religious laws, and all of these folks were definitely “the lost” in the eyes of the watching Pharisees and scribes. (And don’t we harbor some thoughts about who the modern day version of these folks are?)

The religious authorities complain about the company Jesus keeps (after all, you can’t sit down and eat with just *anyone*), and he responds not only with this story but with two other parables of lost-ness, about a sheep and a coin both precious in the eyes of their owners, both lost and then found, and both celebrated with a party, with everyone invited who is willing to rejoice. Sort of like a big raucous hobbit birthday party?

John Stendahl says that it is all about actions and not words. That is, that the turning home itself was all it took, the bringing ourselves into range, so to speak, of God’s love, which sets us free but waits and watches and hopes for our return. Did the father do the math and calculate what his younger son had cost

him? Stendahl suggests not, and focuses instead on the overflowing joy of the welcome home the boy received.

Perhaps a party waits for us also. For we are the sinners and tax collectors, the wandering and wasteful son, and perhaps the resentful older brother, too. Where do you find yourself in the story? Can we let ourselves be received and honored at the party, and can we bring ourselves to attend and be part of the action?

Our gospel read is not just about you or me, or my sin or your sin. It is about God and God's life-giving love and mercy. God is still speaking. As Rodney Clapp puts it, "every time God's active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for the rest of us. It means there is more. More wine. More feasting. More music. More dancing. It means another, and now bigger, party."

Maybe those darn hobbits were on to something!