

Salvation Stories

Mark 5:19b; Luke 15:11-32

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

March 15, 2026/Fourth Sunday of Lent

The theme we have been exploring at our annual delegate sessions this weekend is “Storytelling: A Bridge to Healing and Hope.”

It’s a good theme. Stories matter. Human beings have always been storytellers. It is how we make sense of our experience, how we develop empathy for others, how we remember things. Our brains are wired for stories.

And as Christians, we are of course followers of the Master Storyteller. Jesus told good stories. Jesus told stories that were bridges to healing and hope of the deepest kind (even his listeners didn’t realize this until later, if at all).

Jesus told stories about

- workers who showed up late and got paid more than they expected
- about a Samaritan who showed mercy at the side of the road
- about a treasure hidden in fields, and farmers who scatter seeds
- about houses build on sand and rocks
- about rich fools storing up treasures that won’t last
- about a servant who is forgiven a staggering debt, yet refuses to forgive in response
- about religious leaders who broadcast their righteousness a bit too loudly and tax collectors who can only cry out, “have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Each one of these stories offer a bridge to healing and hope, if those who listen have ears to hear and are willing to walk across it.

Each of these, in their own way, is a salvation story.

One of Jesus' most famous stories, as the story we've heard—the story about a father and his two sons. Perhaps the most beloved of Jesus' stories.

///

I like to tell stories, too. Some of my favourite stories to tell come from the prison down the road where I serve as a chaplain.

Not necessarily because they are always nice stories (they're often hard stories). But because for me they tell the truth of the human condition and how the gospel touches it in a powerful way.

I want to share one story. Lethbridge folks will have heard this one before. I told it a few years ago, so I hesitate to use it again. Because if there's anything that I know about our church after nearly fifteen years here, it's that people remember all my sermons with detailed precision. 😊

But, you know, stories can be told more than once. Indeed, you could argue that telling the same story over and over again is kind of the job description of a pastor.

At any rate, a few years ago, I was summoned to meet with an inmate.

Whenever I introduce myself to the inmates at the jail, I always try to make eye contact, refer to them by name, and shake their hands very deliberately.

So much of life in jail is impersonal and dehumanizing. Any little gesture to counter this feels worth it to me.

And so, I was very consciously looking this man in the eye when we shook hands. But something felt off. I looked down and was shocked to discover that he only had two out of ten fingers. I was shaking a palm and a few stumps.

I immediately suspected what the story was, and my suspicions were borne out during our subsequent conversation. Too many cold prairie winters living rough on the streets. Frostbite.

My heart broke for this man. Like so many of the men (and women) I talk to in jail, his story was one of great pain endured and almost certainly great pain inflicted upon others.

It became evident very quickly that I could not do for this man what he wanted me to (he had a complex set of questions that involved a case worker not a chaplain); so, I tried to steer the conversation in another direction.

One of the best ways to do this, I have discovered, is to simply ask questions. I asked him about where he grew up (Toronto), about his family (most of them, including all his siblings, refuse to speak to him anymore).

“Well, tell me about your parents,” I said. His face kind of lit up. “Aw, my parents, they’re the best... My mom died a few years ago, but my dad is still around. He was a pastor in Pentecostal church.

“I remember when I was a young man in Toronto, and I would be out on the streets, you know, drugs, sex, parties, crime, the whole deal... But my dad, it didn’t matter where I was or who I was with or what I had gotten myself into, if I called him, he was there. He would come and bail me out or buy me breakfast or give me some cash for rent...

“He’s never given up on me. Even though I’ve given him every possible reason to, he never has.”

He stopped talking and just kind of looked down and then back up at me. We both smiled.

I said, “Sounds like a story Jesus told about a lost son who runs off and gets into all kinds of trouble and comes back home to a father who never stopped loving him and waiting for him.”

“Yeah,” he said. “He was just like that guy.”

It was a beautiful moment. It was a *Kairos* moment to borrow a term from Arlyn’s performance last night—a moment where God’s time interrupted sequential, chronological time.

On one level, the scene was depressingly ordinary. Nothing supernatural about it at all.

We were sitting behind a heavy locked door in a storage closet where a desk and a few plastic chairs had been haphazardly thrown together. We were surrounded by stacks of

toilet paper rolls and yellowing papers and an old vacuum cleaner. There were guys yelling outside the door.

But it was a moment where Truth reached into the real world with all its ugliness and pain and said, “Pay attention. This is your God.”

///

Among the important questions that we should always be asking about the stories Jesus tells are: Who was this story told *to*? And why?

Jesus stories are never just timeless fables that float above history and culture and relationships, although they obviously do transcend time and space.

They were always told at a particular time in a particular place and for a particular reason.

For the immediate context of this parable, we go back to the beginning of chapter 15:

Now the **tax collectors and sinners** were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the **Pharisees and the teachers of the law** muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus goes on to tell them three parables—one about finding a lost sheep, another about a woman finding a lost coin, and then a parable about a father and his lost son.

Jesus is speaking *to* the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling. He’s also speaking, presumably, within earshot of the “tax collectors and sinners” who had come near to listen.

These two groups of people are symbolized by the two brothers in this story.

The tax collectors and sinners are the younger son, those who have wandered from God, those who have made a mess of things, those who have turned their backs on their fathers and blown the inheritance.

The Pharisees and scribes are the older brother. The ones who have stayed home, followed the rules, done what their father asked.

Both groups are there. But Jesus is speaking *primarily* to the Pharisees and religious leaders (Luke 15:1-2). It is their “grumbling” about who Jesus is hanging out with that leads to these three stories.

This story is Jesus’ direct response to the Pharisees complaint that he was associating with the wrong sorts of people, that the wrong sorts of people were being welcomed in on what God was doing.

Jesus is talking to older brothers. He is telling them that God is where the lost things are.

///

We may identify with the younger brother. Or the father. I have at various points in my life.

But I suspect that there’s a lot more older brother in most of us than we might care to admit.

Especially those of us who have been doing this “Christian” thing for a while.

Perhaps, we have never left home and find ourselves grumbling about God’s generosity from time to time.

Perhaps we resent those who are welcomed into the family after a lifetime of destructive and hurtful choices.

Perhaps we just think we are owed more than we have been receiving.

According to Tim Keller in his little book *The Prodigal God*, the older brother is just as lost as the younger brother. Indeed, his lostness is more dangerous, because it is predicated on his own moral performance.

Keller says that older brothers are a far bigger problem in the church than younger brothers.

Why, he asks, do so many churches tend to repel younger brothers and attract older brothers when Jesus had the exact opposite effect?

A sobering question, that one.

Older brothers are everywhere. You may have noticed this.

Older brothers on the right tend to be full of evangelical zeal, doctrinal precision, and piety. They are faithful to the church. They like preachers who “just preach the bible.” They tend to be quite conservative politically and theologically and look down on those who have the wrong views about the social issues that dominate the news.

They tend to define their purity in opposition to those “other Christians” who are so obviously wrong and have completely misunderstood who Jesus was and what he wanted.

Older brothers on the left tend to be activist warriors, full of evangelical zeal and piety (if of a different sort). They like preachers who summon them to justice and solidarity and political advocacy. They tend to be quite liberal politically and theologically and look down on those who have the wrong views about the social issues that dominate the news.

They tend to define their purity in opposition to those “other Christians” who are so obviously wrong and have completely misunderstood who Jesus was and what he wanted.

As in another story Jesus told, both loudly proclaim to God (and anyone within earshot), “I thank you, Lord, that I am not like that sinner over there...”

According to Richard Lovelace, who was a professor at Gordon Conwell Seminary, all older brothers have the same thing in common:

- They aren't sure if God loves them apart from their achievements...
- They are radically insecure...
- They are proud and defensive of their own righteousness...
- They are critical and suspicious of others...
- They are constantly seeking to boost their security and validate their anger.

I wonder, do we see any of these characteristics in our discourse these days? Out there in the world? In here, inside the church, MCA, MC Canada?

Older brothers, as much their wayward younger brothers, need to come home.

///

Did you notice that Jesus leaves the story “unfinished?”

We don’t know how the older brother responded to his father’s gentle rebuke, nor, for that matter, do we know how the younger son responded to the party in his honour. We don’t hear a word from either one of them after the father speaks his last words.

Perhaps, by leaving the parable unfinished like this, Jesus was inviting all the younger and older brothers within earshot—then or now—to provide the ending themselves.

My prayer for us, here in Lethbridge, in Mennonite Church Alberta, Mennonite Church Canada and beyond—is that God would inspire his people to be as reckless with mercy as the Father in this salvation story Jesus told.

That we would let go of the self-righteousness that we are so easily drawn to.

That we would seek always to enact what we have sung throughout this weekend—that we believe that mercy is how we are restored, in the receiving and in the giving.

That, like that *Kairos* moment in a dingy prison room, we might be reminded in a new way: “Pay attention. This is our God.”

May we do as Jesus commanded in our weekend’s theme verse from Mark 5: Go, talk about what the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”

Amen.

