

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Lost”

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Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

3 So he told them this parable:

11 Then Jesus said, ‘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 that 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” ³¹Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.” ’

A few months ago, my brother and sister and father and I had lunch together. It was just the four of us gathered by ourselves for the first time since my mother died. Our conversation evolved into childhood memories and the previously unsolved family mysteries. We talked about who really broke Mom’s prized table lamp, who actually cut into the cake which she had prepared for Women’s Fellowship, and who was the true culprit behind the dented fender of my brand new bicycle. You might be happy to know that in all of those cases, it wasn’t me!

After a few moments of silence my sister turned to me and said, “Did you know I really hated you back then?” I was taken aback! How do you respond to a statement like that? I didn’t, but she kept going anyway. “It was when you went off to college and came home once in a while for a weekend. I was at home all the time, doing chores and cooking meals and running errands for Mom and Dad. When you came home from college Mom and Dad stopped their lives and waited on you. They took the car away from me and you got to use it. They even put gas in it! Mom cooked your favorite meal. She helped with your laundry. When you left to go back to school, Dad took out his wallet and handed you some money. I was really mad but I didn’t say anything. I felt just like the older brother of the prodigal son.”

It helped just a bit that she ended her story with a laugh. At least then I knew she wasn’t accusing me of wasting my share of the family inheritance on a collegiate life of wine, women, and song. She was honestly and lovingly expressing her feelings that at one time she believed I received preferential treatment from our parents. Perhaps we have all had those feelings about our siblings. Like Tommy Smothers we believe that “Mom always liked you best!”

Perhaps that is the emotion that hits us when we read this familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. Am I supposed to feel sorry for that brat of a younger son? That no-good bum! I wouldn’t take my inheritance and abandon my responsibilities to a life of pleasure. I would never squander what is given to me and then expect to receive even more. But what about the loyal, hard working son? Now there is someone to whom I can relate. He stays at home, keeps his nose clean, and works hard. The end of this parable is much too unfair to him. We get caught up in the characters because one of them is so very much like us and the other is so very much like someone we all know and whose fate we would like to manage.

It was normal for a Jewish father to divide his property among his sons. What was strange was for him to divide it up before his death. But the younger son wanted things now. His cash grab declared his father legally dead in his eyes. He violated the commandment to honor his parents. He now wasted all the money living a reckless life. He ended up caring for pigs, the least respected of all occupations. He was a failure in everything until the depth of his situation led him to face reality. He repented. He came back home. He sought to renew his relationship with his father.

Dear old dad was filled with compassion. He ran to greet his returning son. He ran even though running was quite undignified for a person of his position. He offered to his son the very best robe, shoes, and a ring-something you would give to an honored guest, not a servant. He issued a kiss of forgiveness, not a cold slap on the face. He called for a feast of celebration and joy, not a time of penance and hard work to restore the relationship. What was once lost had now been found and had come home.

And there watching this unbelievable turn of events, out in the fields working of course, was our hero the older brother. He had led a blameless life. He had never given his father an anxious moment. Yet no one had ever made a fuss over him. But the squeaky wheel gets the grease. So the older son turned hostile and childish. He accused his father of not caring for him. "This worthless brother of mine wasted your property! I have been faithful to you and you haven't done anything for me. Come to the party? You must be kidding! I'd rather stand out in the hallway and eat yesterday's leftovers than come into the room and party with my undeserving brother!"

And so the older son refuses to come into the house. This is a terrible insult to the father, right in front of all of the invited guests. Suddenly, perhaps without any of us even noticing, the older son is just as lost as his younger brother ever was. He resents his father's acceptance, forgiveness and celebration. He does not want to be in any relationship where such things are so easily given. And so he stands outside the house, separated from his father's love.

Remember the grumbling of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law in the first few verses of the Scripture lesson this morning? "This Jesus, he welcomes those people, those sinners and outcasts, those lost." In the parable, the younger son is the outcast and lost, now found and repentant, welcomed home by a joyous father. In the parable, the older brother, one resenting God's grace being wasted on someone distant from the cause, speaks the grumbling words. And in the end of the parable, those who criticize God's grace find themselves distanced from the very God they claim to follow. Because of their criticism they are now the lost ones, separated from God.

I have read that there is a parallel to this story in Buddhist literature. However in that story the father greets the returning son and makes him do penance for a number of years to prove his commitment to his new attitude. Maybe the older son in us all could live with that particular version of the parable. Perhaps the father should have said, "You know son, it is great to see you. I'm glad you're home. But you caused me a lot of grief. You've got to prove yourself to me and to your older brother. Now buckle down and get to work. Earn your keep and we'll talk about reward later."

But this is not the way of the father of the lost. He runs to greet his wayward son, rejoicing in his return, forgetting formality, tradition and custom to celebrate the reunion. And he leaves his invited guests at the table, neglecting his role as proper host, and runs out to meet his angry, good son, trying to explain to him the importance of keeping the family together. He leaves everything behind to greet both of his lost sons. The father knows that it is not concern about greatness and honor and rightness and justice that will bring the lost back to life. Rather it is through actions which create and celebrate reunion.

Preaching professor Thomas Long tells of an essay he once read in which a woman was reminiscing about her father. She said that when she was very young, she

was very close to her father. Sometimes they would have large family gatherings, attended by aunts and uncles and all of her cousins. Someone would put on some music, usually the “Beer Barrel Polka.” Her father would come up to her; tap her on the shoulder and say, “I believe this is our dance.” Father and daughter would dance in joy. One time however, years later when the girl was a teenager and in one of those teenaged moods, there was another family gathering. The “Beer Barrel Polka” was played and her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, “I believe this is our dance.” She snapped at him, “Don’t touch me! Leave me alone!” And her father sadly turned away and never asked her to dance again.

The woman wrote, “Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years. When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe. And I would snarl at him, ‘What do you think you are doing?’ He would look at me with sad eyes and say, ‘I was just waiting on you.’”

She wrote, “When I went away to college I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him and for years I never communicated with him. But as I grew older I began to miss him. One day I decided to go to the next family gathering. Someone put on the “Beer Barrel Polka.” I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘I believe this is our dance.’ He turned toward me and said, ‘I’ve been waiting on you.’”

This is the action of the one who seeks the lost. God stands in the middle of our lives, waiting us out, even when our words and our deeds have done their best to distance us from the divine. God celebrates and dances, when all of the lost find a reason to repent- especially when those lost older brothers who don’t see a reason to repent, finally do.