

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 15: *"Lost And Found"*

We've come to one of the reasons that many of us love Luke's Gospel – the parable of the *Prodigal Son*. To understand it, we need first to remember the context of the three parables of the *"Lost Sheep,"* the *"Lost Coin,"* and the *"Lost Son."* Jesus is being criticized by the Pharisees and Scribes for welcoming, and especially *eating with,* tax-collectors and other "sinners." Such people come from "the wrong side of the tracks;" they are collaborators and traitors to Israel and Israel's God; they are "unclean" and should be shunned, not invited to dinner! But just such "poor" and socially marginalized people are flocking to Jesus because he welcomes them into his new community, "the kingdom of God." So Jesus' parables about being lost and found are his rebuke to the Pharisees for not welcoming and celebrating the return to the fold of these "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

1) *A Lost Sheep and A Lost Coin*

So he tells about the one sheep that gets separated from the flock, and the great efforts of "the good shepherd" to find it, to rescue it from danger, to carry it home on his shoulders, and his rejoicing that his sheep has been found and restored. Was the sheep at fault for wandering off? Probably! Was it too stupid to know what it was doing? Very likely! Did the shepherd demand its apology before rescuing it? No. But thanks to the shepherd's effort, the sheep has returned

home. This means what? Jesus says that *"in the same way there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents."* So – Pharisees! – can you not be glad that poor, unclean, outsiders are turning to Jesus and his message of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration? Won't you join the feasting and celebrating?

Or the good woman who loses one of her ten silver coins, and so lights her lamp and sweeps her whole room until she finds it. Then she calls her neighbors in to celebrate with her: of what was likely her family's life savings – maybe 3 months income – she had lost one tenth. Enough to celebrate over when it is found! Was the coin at fault for being lost? No. Did the woman work and work until she found it? Yes. Was she deeply relieved and delighted when she found that little silver thing in the dirt floor of her house? Certainly! So, says Jesus, *"in the same way there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* Say, Pharisees, says Jesus: are you glad when I find "lost sinners"? Why not?

2) *The Prodigal*

So we come to the Prodigal Son, as he was called for so long. The younger son of a father demands his share of the inheritance, now! It's a bit like him saying, "father, I wish you were dead and I could get your money, now"! But the father agrees, and the son gets his share – probably a third of the estate,

since the oldest son usually got twice what any other son got. Remember, most of the wealth of that day lay in land. But the younger son was not interested in getting his 20 acres, building a small house, getting married and settling down early to independence. He wanted to go off on his own and do what he wanted to do! So he liquidated his share of the estate, sold off property that had probably been in the family for generations, stuffed his pack with coins, and set off on a long journey.

In a "far country" he squandered his so-called freedom, spent all his money, and was a "prodigious" wastrel - *"the Prodigal."* When hard times came he had nothing - no friends, no family, no home, and soon found himself feeding pigs. There was nothing more degrading for a Jew than living among pigs! He was even hungrier than they were. How had he come to this, and so quickly? He had "hit bottom."

But then he *"came to his senses,"* and asked himself "why am I here?" He determined to go home, where his father's servants lived better than he now did. He could only beg his father for a hired laborer's job, but that was better than stealing pig food in a famine-ravaged foreign country. He was, he knew, *"no more worthy to be called a son."* He had shamed himself and his family. So *"he rose up"* - the word has the same root as "resurrected" - and set out for home. He had turned around - *"repented"* is the biblical word for it - and decided to go back to his father in hope of being forgiven, at least enough to get some food and shelter and a menial job.

But the father has been watching for him all along - weeks, months, years, who knows? - and sees him already "a long way off." The father does something no dignified Jew would do - he gathers up his robe and *runs*, bare-legged, to greet his son. Before the son's

confession and plea is out of his mouth, he is overwhelmed that his father is hugging and kissing him, and sending for a robe and ring and sandals - restoring him to the place of a son! And if that were not enough, the father orders "the fatted calf" to be killed, and a great banquet prepared to celebrate the return of the Prodigal! What else would a father do: *"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"*

But the "hook" of the story is still to come. The older brother, who has never strayed from home, who has obeyed his father, who indeed has *"slaved for him,"* is furious at the celebration for this returned wastrel. He berates his father: he has never had even a small banquet, but for "this son of yours" - not "my brother" - but *"for this son of yours, who has squandered our family money on prostitutes, you kill the fatted calf!"* The older brother's anger and resentment are also prodigious! The father has to "come out" to plead with him to go into the banquet. *"You are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; was lost and is found."*

So - Pharisees, "elder brothers" - are you going to come into the banquet? Jesus leaves the story open at that point: will the Pharisees turn to Jesus and enter the kingdom? Or will they stand angrily outside, resentful at the low-lifers and wastrels who are welcomed in? Will any Pharisees join the celebration over repentant sinners who return home? What do you think? Would you? Would I?

3) *The Prodigal God*

What about us? Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC, says in his outstanding little book *The Prodigal God* that the real prodigal in this story is the *father* in his remarkable and abundant forgiveness

and joy over his returned son. The picture is of *God the Father who is prodigal in his love*. Just as in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, this story is about the father, more than about the lost son. The story of the three parables is unmistakable: *God delights in those who return to him*. Which part of that is so hard to understand? Maybe that's not how you have thought of God before, but that's what Jesus teaches. God and the angels of heaven rejoice when people turn to him, and his response to repentance is not just forgiveness but great celebration!

But of course we won't ever forget this story because too many of us have been "younger brothers" who wandered away from God and wasted some part of our lives pursuing something, anything, that would make us feel life was worth living, and at times some of us have found ourselves living in a pig-sty among pigs. So this story is for anyone who at any time has wasted their life. This story is for anyone who reaches the point of asking "what am I doing here?" Everything before that moment may now be a blur; you may have stumbled downhill for years without realizing where you were going, but there comes a moment when you "come to your senses."

And the best of good news, the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is that when we turn towards home, and admit that we no longer deserve to be treated as sons, we discover God our Father running towards us with open arms and hugging us! We don't even have time to say "I have sinned against you, and shamed myself and other people," before he is putting a robe and a ring on us. No matter how far you wander, or to what depths you sink, or how much of your life you waste, or how much of your own money and other people's money you have burned through, you *can come home* again; you can be welcomed by a Father who never once stopped wanting you to come and was

always looking out for you. That is the gospel!

But we're not done yet with this story, are we? Remember that half of the text is about the older brother and his reaction! What can we say about him? As Keller says, he shows there are *two ways of being lost* – *the younger brother's way and the older brother's way*. One goes far from home and is a wastrel; the other stays home and slavishly obeys his father. Yet at the end of the story, the question is whether the *older* brother will go into the banquet! The older brother is the moral person, proud of his good behavior. The older brother is in danger spiritually, because he thinks his obedience means the father owes him something. The older brother is angry with his father because he deserves better treatment than the younger brother!

The older brother is morally superior; the older brother does good because he likes the rewards of being thought a good person, the older brother is critical of wastrels and "sinners." *He* has no need of forgiveness or healing; *he* has done nothing wrong! But why then is he so angry? Why has the "bad brother" gratefully gone into the feast, while the "good brother" resentfully stays outside?

Keller, who has brought the gospel to thousands of "younger brothers" in Manhattan, says younger brothers typically flee churches that they suspect are full of "older brothers." Of the two conditions, says Keller, the older brother's is more dangerous, because he cannot see that he needs to repent of anything, yet he is always angry with other people, and secretly with God, who he thinks owes him a better life after all his moral effort.

So here's our warning. *Which* brother are we? And *where* are we? Still fleeing? In a pig-sty? Come to our senses? Turning for home?

Surprised by joy? Resentful that the Father has not blessed us more after all our efforts? *Prodigal Son or Pharisee?* Which is it? Will we go into the banquet?

Let us pray...