

Sermon: Two Lost Sons
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

15 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ ³ So he told them this parable:

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

11 Then Jesus ^{*} said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with ^{*} the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” ^{*} ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for 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. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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." '

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Have you ever gone to a store, a school, or even a church and when you got home you realized you were missing something – perhaps your keys or a special hat or maybe a favorite umbrella. So you go back there and speak to the first person who will listen to your tale of woe – of how special this item is and how you need to find it. And that employee sends you to the Lost and Found department or brings out their "Lost and Found" box.

Well, Jesus told some stories about lost and found. He told the first two stories before he got to this morning's scripture passage. I'm sure you remember them but I am going to use this "Lost and Found" box to help me talk about them and help you to remember them. Can I have some help with the items in my box?

This first item is a sheep. Yes. Jesus told the story of a lost sheep. He asked his listeners who of them would not leave behind 99 sheep to search for the one lost sheep? Now Jesus' listeners were sinners, tax collectors, scribes and Pharisees – a range of people, some who were thought of as righteous and others were considered sinners. Now despite Jesus' question, I'm not convinced that all of Jesus' listeners would leave behind 99 sheep to go look for 1 lost one – that's lousy business and the odds are great that something might happen to one or

more of the 99 sheep that were left behind. I'm not sure that all his listeners would place so much value on one lost sheep. But the shepherd does.

As you know, the shepherd in Jesus' story loves all the sheep. He goes out to find the one lost one. He's successful. He hoists that sheep up onto his shoulders, comes home and throws a party. As an aside, have you ever noticed that artists who paint this story choose a beautiful little, white lamb? Not a large, heavy, grey older one that would be a little harder to carry on one's shoulders. The shepherd, like God, rejoices that the lost sheep, like the lost person, is found and is returned home. Jesus tells his listeners – from sinners to Pharisees - that heaven rejoices more when the one lost person is found than it does over 99 righteous persons.

What else is in this box? It's a quarter – a shiny coin. In Jesus' story, the woman loses a coin. She turns the house upside down looking for it, sweeping the floor and looking into all the crannies. She finds it. Perhaps it was under a sofa cushion – I know I have found an assortment of lost things under my sofa cushions. Anyway, where she found it is not important. What matters is that she found the lost coin and it was reason to celebrate. She invites her friends to rejoice with her. And Jesus tells us that angels will rejoice when just one sinner repents... When the lost is found, there is rejoicing.

Now there's one more item in the box. It's a photo of two young men. As you can see, one of the men is practically jumping for joy. The other does not appear to be rejoicing. You might say he appears unhappy. Now the story we heard this morning is about two brothers. While these photos are not actually of two brothers, I think their faces depict the emotions that are described by Jesus in his parable about the prodigal son and his brother. So for this morning, we will say that they will represent the two brothers in this story. Their faces look like how they might appear at the end of the parable – the prodigal son is overjoyed that a party is thrown for him while the responsible son is not happy that his brother has a party thrown for him. And it seems pretty unlikely that he will join that party.

Now, their father is throwing a party for the prodigal son because he has returned home. He was lost, but came back home. He is found. And his father is overjoyed that this son is safe and sound because... you know why... he loves him. His father is rejoicing.

This younger, prodigal son had asked his father for his inheritance so that he could go experience the world. You could say he was lost even before he set out on his journey with the money his father gave him. He was a lost soul, seeking satisfaction in money and the supposed pleasures of the world. And after he had spent all his money and was penniless, he ended up slopping pigs. He was a Jewish boy feeding pigs. How humiliating! He had hit rock bottom. In addition to the humiliation, he was hungry. No one offered him food. No one cared.

So this humiliated, hungry, broke and broken, lost son decided to return home. He even prepared an apology, a speech for his father that acknowledged that he had really messed up and didn't deserve to be called his son. The prodigal son knew he was lost, wanted to return home – even if it meant becoming a hired hand. He planned to ask his father's forgiveness.

Well his father had been looking for him, longing for his return. You see his father loved his son. When he saw his son coming home, he didn't need an apology. He threw his arms around his son, who had been lost but was now home.

The father knew that the inheritance, the money that the son had thrown away was not the important part. Love was the important part. So forgiveness – which was simply part of the equation, a component of the father's love - was what the father offered his son. Like the shepherd who had sought the one sheep that had wandered away, like the woman who had scoured the house for the lost coin; when the lost were found there was rejoicing. The father was rejoicing.

So he wanted to throw a party for his son. Maybe he was also throwing it for himself- for an opportunity to rejoice in love.

Now, the son who we think of as the "responsible" son, learns of his brother's return and his brother's party. This son is angry that he has never received the money or the party that his father has given his brother. This son, though he has never left the family homestead, is lost. While he disapproved of his brother's running off with the money that would have been his brother's heritage and squandering it, he did not consider that his brother had come to his senses and returned home safe and sound. He did not rejoice out of love for his brother.

He did not acknowledge that he had all he needed while he was home. His father reminded him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But 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.” ’ Jesus had already told his listeners, “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:7)

This “responsible” son, on that day, was resentful. He was seeking justification or praise or reward. Money and acknowledgement were what was important to him. This son did not need more money or accolades for what he was doing at home. His needs had been met. And he already had the important thing. He had his father’s love. But what he had was not enough. All that he had was not good enough for him. You could say that this son, prioritizing rewards over the safe return of his brother, over love and forgiveness, was lost.

It’s easy to get lost. Looking for something that we think will make us happy. Striving for riches and accomplishments over gratitude for what we have and humility. Holding onto resentment over offering forgiveness. Failing to see the blessings that surround us and the love that we have.

Kate Bowler offers a blessing in her “Happy Enough” devotional. These words are a portion of that blessing. “Blessed are you amid the ordinary details that define what life is for you, right now. And as you see them, greet them – each one – as you smile and call them by name. Every day joys. Small pleasures. Birds chirping. Cat cuddles. A cold glass of water. A little child calling your name. The breeze on your cheeks. The ocean rhythm. The perfect pillow. The kindness of a friend. Loves that are and were and ever will be. ... Blessed are you, finding that life is good because it is enough.”

So let us remember - for those time we forget, for those times we wander, for those times we are lost – let us remember that God looks for us, calls to us, forgives us, and welcomes us home. God’s love is extravagant. God’s forgiveness is more than we deserve. And that’s more than enough, much more!

