

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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LOST (and found)

(Luke 15)

Introduction: Misplacements I have known...

This past Thursday morning was tough.

Midway through an early morning breakfast I realized that I didn't have my phone. So, after breakfast, I went back to the house to pick up my phone and come to church.

After a few minutes of searching I couldn't find my phone at home, so I figured I must have left it at the church the night before. When I got to the church, I called it and never heard its familiar ring. At that point, I began to get concerned. What if someone wanted to call me?

I called Kathy who looked everywhere for the phone at home.

Sidebar: Kathy looking for things I've misplaced is not newsworthy. Besides, "What?" the most commonly asked question at our home is, (from me) "Have you seen my...?" She's often able to locate things that I've misplaced. I think she does it with magic.

I continued to look through the rubble that I call my desk and every place else I could find here at church.

I had already looked in my truck and hadn't found it, but decided to try it one more time. As I opened the door to the truck, I heard that wonderful sound - the ring of my phone. Someone (I wonder who) had buried it deep under a pile of papers on the passenger side of the front seat.

Finally, I had my phone back! What a relief. There is nothing so wonderful as finding something that has been lost. (I should know.)

Perhaps you, too, know the feeling of panic when you realize that a treasured something has been lost, and the delight of finding that treasured something.

Jesus understands. And so He gave us a set of three parables two thousand years ago involving lost and found things that give us a glimpse into the heart of God.¹

Last Sunday I spoke to you about a vision for the future of our church where everybody serves and where everybody is on mission for the Great Commission. Whether here at church, or out in the community - or in both settings - we are all grateful to God for His grace, and gratefully serving people in Jesus' Name.

The parables we will hear this morning nudge us toward the kind of service - redemptive service - that Jesus loves.²

Jesus gave these parables on an occasion when He was speaking to two very different groups of people at the same time. Among those listening were some who weren't what anybody would call "religious."

Introduction: The Parables' Audiences (vv. 1-3)

Those Who GATHERED TO Jesus! (v. 1)

[1a] Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near to Him...

The *tax-gatherers* job was to help the Romans collect taxes from their fellow Jews. Tax-collectors were generally hated and were considered traitors for cooperating with the Romans.

The *sinner*s on the other hand, were those who flagrantly broke God's Law. The sinners were the immoral people - and they KNEW that they were.

¹ Approximately one third of Jesus' teaching is recorded in the form of parables, but He wasn't the first to use parables as vehicles for communication. We find a number of parables in the Old Testament, and the parable was a favorite teaching style of the Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day.

² Interestingly enough, the parables we find in Luke 15 follow some of the most stringent calls to discipleship Jesus gave (Luke 14:25-35).

The sinners and the tax-gatherers had stopped trying to conform to Jewish community standards for behavior. But, they are the first people referred to in this passage. And what were they doing?

They were **[1b]...coming near Him to listen to Him.**

Fascinating...

Here is a group of people who were the outcasts of the religious community, seeking to be with Jesus, who was the center of attention for the whole religious community.

What does that tell us? Simple. They were hungry.

We might have thought that they would be un-interested in spiritual things, but no. They were very sensitized to the gaping God-shaped hole in their hearts, and so they listened to Jesus.

There were others in Jesus' audience on this day, and they weren't so hungry. They were the Pharisees and the scribes, the spiritual leaders of first century Israel.

Those Who GRUMBLED AT Jesus! (v. 2)

[2] Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

They didn't think that He, a holy man, should eat with "them" (you know who "them" is - the outsiders, the sinners, the ones who don't fit in.

In Jesus' day, the normal interaction that could be expected between a "holy man" and one of the "sinners" was a big ZERO.³

But Jesus enjoyed getting together with these folks. He was invited to their parties and was welcomed in their homes. They felt comfortable with Him, and He loved them and he loved being with them.⁴

³ The Pharisees of that time period are on record as going so far as to say that they would purposefully NOT teach "sinners" the Law of Moses. They avoided them at every turn. And, to eat with sinners - as Jesus did on many occasions - was even worse than mere association (to eat with them violated kosher.).

And so, the scene having been set for us, Luke takes us straight from the grumbings of the Pharisees to the parables.⁵

The first parable pictures a shepherd tending sheep who discovers that one out of his flock of one hundred has gone missing.

A Lost Sheep Found! (vv. 4-7)

[3] So He told them this parable, saying, [4] "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?"

The shepherd knows that in the situation he is facing, he is the go-to guy. It is up to him to find and retrieve the lost sheep. And that he does.

The ninety-nine in the open pasture are OK. He's got to find the one lost sheep. That's where all of his attention is riveted!

And when he finds it, the shepherd doesn't beat the sheep or berate the sheep.

[5] "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

After getting the sheep safely back to the fold, he let everybody in on the great news of the found sheep.

[6] "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'"

It's a nice story, but entertainment wasn't the reason Jesus told the parable. He gave the parable because the actions of the shepherd open a window into the heart of God.

⁴ He even called one of those outcasts (a tax-collector named Levi/Matthew) to be one of His apostles.

⁵ Read verse 3 carefully and you'll see that Jesus actually spoke TO the scribes and Pharisees.

[7] “I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Jesus had no doubt seen this response in heaven countless times as sinners had come home to God.

Over the ninety nine who already believe there is “constant, steady joy”, but over the one who returns, there is a sudden shout of celebration!

Right on the heels of this first happy parable comes a second parable with a virtually identical message. In this one Jesus couches the story in the language of a homemaker on a quest for something else lost.

A Lost Coin Found! (vv. 8-10)

[8] “Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?”

This woman possessed a certain amount of money - ten valuable silver coins - and she has lost one of them.

As soon as she realized that the coin was missing, this woman flew into action. Evidently, the action took place at night - we know that because she had to light a lamp to search for the coin. It was a search that could not wait until the morning. She had to find the coin NOW!

So, she searched carefully in every nook and cranny until she found it. And, when she finally located the coin, her response was identical to that of the shepherd who recovered his sheep.

[9] “When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’”

And, to cap off this domestic parable, Jesus ended with a heavenly point.

[10] “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Jesus told these two parables to drive home a truth about God’s great heart: He searches for the lost person. He rejoices when lost people are found. Heaven celebrates at the repentance of a lost person.

And they do get the point across. But to attach an exclamation mark to the point, He saved His most powerful lost/found parable for last.⁶

This one starts off by letting us in on a discussion in which a son makes a request of his father.⁷

Lost Son(s) Found (hmmm...) (vv. 11-32)

A Prodigal Son (vv. 11-24)

A Father grants a son’s ugly request (vv. 11-13)

The request of the younger son (vv. 11-12a)

[11] And He said, “A certain man had two sons. [12a] The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’”⁸

Jesus starts out telling this story in such a matter-of-fact way that it is possible to miss that what is happening here is really ugly.

⁶ If you are very familiar with this parable it is possible that I will omit a detail that means a lot to you from what I have to say today. Sorry - but it is not possible to bring to light every truth this parable holds in one message. (nor would I claim to know all that this parable holds!). So, I’ll apologize in advance for any meaningful omissions. If you would like to read an excellent treatment of this book I highly recommend Henri Nouwen’s [The Return of the Prodigal](#).

⁷ Many of my thoughts for this message have been sparked by Nouwen’s book, which in turn was inspired by Rembrandt’s painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. *The Prodigal* was one of Rembrandt’s last paintings, an oil on canvas eight feet high by six feet wide.

⁸ There were a couple of ways in which a family inheritance could be divided between older and younger sons in a Jewish family. Generally, in Jesus’ day, in a two son family, the first born son would receive 2/3rds of his father’s estate, and the second born would receive 1/3rd. In families with three sons, the first born would receive 2/4’s while the other two received 1/4 each. But, it was not unusual for the younger sons to receive gifts of varying size from their father, while the oldest son would actually inherit the bulk of all the father’s holdings, land, livestock, etc.... In fact, this is what is implied in the term, “birthright”.

Normally, a son would receive his share of the estate when his father died. So, the sense of the request is, *“I’m not going to waste my time sitting around here waiting for you to die, old man. Give me what’s coming to me now!”*

We aren’t told what the father’s response was to this request, but I can imagine he was hurt. One week away from Father’s Day, it’s safe to assume that no dad here would want to get this kind of a message from his child: *“I don’t want to have anything to do with you, dad, but I sure do want your money.”*

Jesus doesn’t explore the father’s emotional response to his son’s request, but He does tell us what the father said and did.

He gave what his son requested. He didn’t hedge his son in or force him to stay. Even though his wise heart must have known what a disaster lay ahead of his son, and that the money would destroy him, he granted him the dignity of autonomy. He set his son free.

Home-leaving (rebellion)

[12b] “So he divided his wealth between them. [13a] “And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country...”

The son’s request for an early inheritance was ugly. And his leaving was more than an expression of a desire to “see the world.” He wanted to break with everything that had been a part of his life to this point - his upbringing, his home, his family, his community. He rebelled against it all. His leaving is a wholesale rejection of his father.

Jesus tells us what the young man did when he arrived in that new land.

Profligate living

[13b] “and there he squandered his estate with loose living.”⁹

⁹ J. B. Phillips renders the end of verse 13, ***“He squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance.”*** The sense of the original word is that of a lifestyle that is reckless and unthinking.

With the kind of living implied in those words it didn’t take long to run through his inheritance. He quickly found himself with no resources.

Then, things got bad.

A prodigal son’s bitter harvest (vv. 14-16)

Need strikes! (v. 14)

[14] “Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.”

Have you ever been tempted to think, when one hard thing piles on top of another, *“Well, I sure didn’t need THAT!”*? My guess is that this is what the young prodigal was thinking.

Part of the reason the younger son was in need was totally his own fault. He had spent all of his inheritance. But part of the reason he was in need wasn’t his fault. There was a famine.

In an economy depressed by a famine, work would have been hard to find, pay would have been low, and prices would have been high. Talk about a mess!

In the end, this young man was reduced to a humiliating role in society.

He became humiliated! (15-16)

[15] “So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. [16] “And he would gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.”

- He was humiliated because he had to hire out to a Gentile. (We know it was to a Gentile because he kept pigs.)
- He was humiliated because he had to feed the pigs.
- He was humiliated because he was hungrier than the pigs he was feeding!

(If you have ever struggled with low self-esteem, consider this young man’s plight. The pigs were more highly esteemed than he!)

The prodigal son is desperate - and it was his desperation that brought him **“to his senses.”** In the middle of his suffering and humiliation, a light bulb came on and he remembered home.

The prodigal comes to his senses (vv. 17-19)

[17] “But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! [18] ‘I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; [19] ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.’”

He’s going to return to his father. And that resolve to return is a good thing. But it’s not without its problems.

He’s returning, but he is still far from understanding his father. He’s returning, but he still doesn’t “get” his father’s graciousness and kindness. He’s returning, but NOT trusting his father’s goodwill but his own (somewhat) manipulative speech.

But, at least he is returning.

A broken return, and a great reception (vv. 20-24)

The return (v. 20)

[20a] “So he got up and came to his father.”

We watch as the son trudges up the road to the place where his father is. Jesus didn’t say that the son went home, or to his village, or to his neighborhood. No, **“he came to his father.”**

Watch the welcome of the father!

[20] “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him.”

Jesus means for us to understand that the father had been watching the road in front of the house ever since his son left home.

And when he saw him walking up the drive, there was no holding back on the intensity of the greeting!

After his dad’s “compassion attack”, the prodigal backed away, brushed himself off, and began the speech he had prepared when he was in the other country, feeding the swine.

[21] “And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, I am no longer worthy to be called your son...’”

It’s a good speech, well written, well-rehearsed, probably well-delivered. But, he didn’t even get a chance to make it through the whole thing because his father cut him off and began preparing for a welcome home bash.

The reception (22-24)

[22] “But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; [23] and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;”

The “best robe” and the ring symbolized a position of high authority in the home. Sandals marked him as a free man and not a slave.

And then, with the prodigal son all decked out, the party got rolling, complete with rib eyes and tenderloins and sirloins from the calf fattened for just such an occasion.

The father invited the guests with, **[24] ““for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found. And they began to celebrate.”**

In this party-throwing exuberance, the father pictures for us the heart of God. Your heavenly Father’s posture to you this morning is open arms! He is crazy about you.

He is thrilled that you saw the desperation of your situation and returned to Him. He’s really glad that you got tired of feeding swine. He couldn’t be happier that you are in His family.

Now, in the three parables we have seen this morning, the seeking, welcoming heart of God has been obvious in the shepherd, the homemaker, and the father. Our God is a God who with a heart for the lost.

So, wouldn't this be a great place to end the parable? One would think so. But the parable doesn't end here at all because there is another brother. This father has another son who now takes center stage.

Another Prodigal Son (vv. 25-32)

Big Brother makes a discovery (vv. 25-27)

[25] “Now his older son was in the field (Doing what? Working! That's what he always did. That's what he was supposed to do.), **and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.”**

Curious as to what was going on up at the house, he pulled aside a breathless servant who may have been carrying steaks for the feast.

[26] “And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be.”

The servant explained.

[27] “And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.’”

Now, what kind of a response would you expect from a loving, older brother at such news? “*He's back? My kid brother's back?! Fantastic. I've been so worried about him - let me go see him!*”

Well, that is not exactly the response we hear. The angels in heaven will rejoice over the return of the lost, but this big brother didn't rejoice over the return of his prodigal little brother.

Big Brother seethes with resentment (v. 28)

[28a] “But he became angry, and was not willing to go in;”

He refused to join the party held in honor of a brother's return. And he stayed outside. He stayed outside for a long time.

After a while, it must have become awkward with the older brother sulking outside, so the father took a time out from the festivities inside and went outside to beg his older son to come in and join in the party.

[28b] “and his father came out and began pleading with him.”

But, the older brother was not about to go in! He was so mad, he couldn't see straight, and he let his father have a piece of his mind.

Big brother vents! (vv. 29-30)

[29] “But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends; [30] but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’”

Can you hear it? “*I have been the model son. I've been slaving for you all my life. And what do I have to show for it? Nothing!*”

And who can challenge this elder son's claims? It is true that he had been, on one level, a model son. Hard-working. Responsible. Disciplined.

But he had never grasped the idea that sonship had more to do with relationship than blessing. He had never seen that being a son has less to do with works and more to do with grace.

The older son had come to value the father's blessings more than the father's presence. And he certainly didn't share his father's heart for the lost.

So, what we see is that not only had the younger son left the father, the older son, too, had wandered away from his father, even while still living at home! He, too, was a prodigal.

And his prodigality put him in a much more precarious position than his younger brother because he wouldn't admit to himself that he had strayed.

There is something very clean-cut and identifiable about the younger brother's sin. It is overt, it is immoral, you can see it.

But the lostness and prodigality of the elder son is much harder to deal with. He did all the right things.

People no doubt respected him, admired him, praised him, and considered him the model son he knew himself to be. BUT, how far he had strayed became evident in the face of his father's welcome of his kid brother.

Listen as the father answers this second son's complaint and exposes his own great heart at the end of this story.

Conclusion: The heart of the Father (vv. 31-32)

[31] "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32] But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours¹⁰ was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

And THAT is how the parable ends. We are left wondering whatever happened to the elder son.

- Did he let himself be persuaded by his father to welcome his brother?
- Did he finally enter into the house and enter into the celebration?
- Did he embrace his brother and welcome him home?
- Did he sit down with his father and brother to break bread together?

Or did he remain outside, sullen, sulking, bitter?

We do not know whether the elder son EVER reconciled himself with his brother or with his father.

Unlike a fairy tale, this parable provides no happily-ever-after ending. Like so many parables (and like so many other places in Scripture) Jesus leaves us without a snappy punch line and asks us to think, ponder, and meditate.

We wonder what happened and we wonder what the parable of the two prodigal sons says to us.

We ponder the older brother who was a model son, and was about as far away from the heart of the father as he could be. We ponder the younger son, who had been a truly lousy son, but suspect that after his return served faithfully AND with an appreciation of his father's heart for relationship, for grace, for the lost.

After a message last Sunday that dealt with the importance of serving, being on mission for the Great Commission, it's probably transparent why I brought this message today.

We who are called to serve look at Luke 15 and are left with two possible models to follow:

We could imitate the older brother and become "model" Christians who work like crazy but who never grasp the heart of our Father for relationship, for love, for grace, for the lost. (but who would want to do THAT?!)

OR...

We can become what I suspect the younger son became. We can become wildly enthusiastic servants of God who are moved by our Father's love and grace to invest deeply in the lives of needy people in Jesus' Name! (Yes!!)

Come on. Join the party. Receive the unfathomable love of God. Then love - and live!

¹⁰ While the older brother does not refer to the prodigal as his brother, yet his father calls the younger, "your brother."