

March 6, 2016  
Luke 15:11-32  
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## **“Lost and Found”**

**Good morning. This is a Sunday when we get to consider a parable which is familiar and beloved for many of us; it’s often called the parable of the Prodigal Son. We find it in Luke chapter 15, where it is the third and final parable in a series of stories about lost things. Lost -- it’s one of Jesus’ repeated themes: lost sheep. Lost coins, lost sons, lost souls, lost hope, lost faith, lost love, lost chances, lost sense. It’s a theme which resonates with us because in some sense it is *our* story, each one of us. We all know that we have been lost or are lost. We feel it every day: a deep ache for which there are no words and an awareness that we cannot see the road ahead. Thomas Merton captured this in the prayer reprinted in our little prayer books which begins, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.”**

**If you have never felt this way, you are either very young, very dependent, or you are kidding yourself. We have all felt this way because this is the path to maturity. Being lost is part of the process of leaving home -- whether we do this physically or not -- and finding out who we are. This process is never -- let me underline that -- never without pain. If you’re counting on your parents to shield you from this, you haven’t really left home. If you expect your spouse to protect you, then you have not become fully your own person. If you expect God to keep your life pain-free then you haven’t been paying attention to the Bible; certainly not to the life of Jesus Christ.**

**I think there’s something for each of us in this parable, depending on which character we identify with. Every neighborhood, every school and every family has produced a prodigal. Most of them aren’t famous; some are infamous. Tim grew up with a neighbor kid who**

shot and killed his father and shot and paralyzed his mother. Maybe others of you have notorious connections, but it doesn't have to be as dramatic as that. We all know or know of friends or family members or church members who have struggled with infidelity or f or addiction or financial ruin or other ways of being lost. Maybe you are that person in your family.

And then there are those of us who have misbehaved in less public ways. We have cherished our bitterness toward a friend or a co-worker who let us down, an ex who betrayed us, parents who didn't give us what we needed. We might seem to be the opposite of prodigal: we don't squander our money or our friendship or our goodwill, we hold on to it tightly, hoarding our hurts, wearing our wounds with pride, wallowing in offense rather than risking forgiveness. That, too, is a form of being prodigal -- squandering relationship for the sake of holding on to resentment.

Last week I gave you a couple definitions which I'll summarize again:

**Justice is getting what we deserve**

**Mercy is *not* getting punishment which we deserve**

**Grace is getting something good which we do not deserve**

Got that? It's a helpful framework to keep in mind. In fact, most of us operate from this framework even when we're not aware of it. In an article with the catchy title "Free Beer," Nancy Rockwell maintains that this is precisely why this story is so significant and so difficult: we've been taught that there is no such thing as a free gift.<sup>1</sup> What's the catch? What will I have to do in return? You keep your side of the bargain and I'll keep mine: you go first. This is why the older brother is so angry. He's spent his whole life keeping his side of the bargain; and he's worked hard at it -- especially knowing that his younger brother has flamed out and not respected the bargain at all. And now he finds out there *is* no bargain. There never was a bargain. His father tells him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." His father has always loved him. No contract necessary. Well that stinks!

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Rockwell, "Free Beer," The Bite in the Apple posted February 2016.

I hope you can understand why the older brother would be so angry about grace. It doesn't matter that he is loved just as much as his younger brother. It isn't fair! Grace isn't fair! And that is the truth of this story: grace isn't fair. If it were fair, it wouldn't be grace, it would be *justice*. And we are not saved by justice, we are saved by grace.

In the midst of the celebration of the younger son's return, we should contemplate some of the implications of grace. Theologian Paul Tillich wrote this in the margin of his Bible in Luke 15: "When the prodigal came home, I hope he didn't stay too long." This is a perceptive comment. We might love a reformed sinner the first time -- but how about the next time? How many of us mess up just once? What about a couple months later when the prodigal son is getting bored with being back at his father's house and says, "Hey Dad, I think I'd like to start a business. Could you loan me the money?" What would it take to exhaust God's love?

So here's a question which is not intended to be facetious: Where is Jesus in this story? The literal answer is that Jesus is the narrator: he's telling this set of parables to a group of tax collectors and sinners -- tax collectors are a sub-set of sinners who are especially resented -- and the Pharisees, the elder brothers who keep track of every little religious transaction -- are offended because Jesus is kind to sinners. Jesus sits and eats with sinners and tax collectors, and doesn't seem to be keeping track of their transgressions at all. Outrageous! But beyond the setting of Luke 15, where do we place Jesus in this story, and how does that influence our understanding of grace?

Our typical reading is that God is the loving Father, running out in the road to welcome sinners home with open arms. I have no problem with this; it's how it makes the most sense to me. But I don't see Jesus as either the irresponsible younger son or the self-righteous older son. So maybe Jesus is one with the Father, extending grace in the same way; or maybe Jesus isn't telling this parable about himself -- maybe it isn't a complete theological understanding of our relationship to God the Father and Christ the Son.

But let's fast-forward -- about nine chapters forward to Luke 23 and the crucifixion of Jesus. How are we to understand the crucifixion in

**the light of this story of the prodigal son? Where is the loving Father of this parable? One traditional Western understanding of the crucifixion is this: that because God is just, God has to punish sin, but because God is loving, God punishes Jesus instead of us. Does that make sense? This understanding sets up an internal tension between God's justice and God's mercy. I think this understanding of the cross says more about our inadequate understanding of justice than it does about God. What if the cross is not about punishment, but about identification, solidarity, and love?<sup>2</sup>**

**Instead of God having to punish someone, what happens to our understanding of the cross if we see it as God loving us enough to become fully human in Jesus Christ, and living a life like ours and identifying with us completely. What if God loves us so much that he was willing to become human and preach and teach and reach others in a way which he knew would lead to suffering and dying the death of a criminal -- and he did it anyway. That is prodigal love -- wasteful, extravagant, over-the-top -- like we see from the Father in our parable. That kind of love doesn't have to punish anyone. It doesn't demand death; it is more powerful than death. That is the promise of the resurrection, that God's love is greater than our sin. When we come to ourselves and turn toward God, we find that God's prodigal love is greater even than our ability to be lost. We once were lost, but through God's love we are found, and it is grace will lead us home.**

**Accepting grace can be painful, if like the younger brother, we have to come to ourselves and realize that we don't deserve what God wants for us. Accepting grace can be impossible if we, like the older brother, cannot realize that it has always been ours -- we never had to earn it. The love of God is greater than what we can imagine or describe. Thank God for that prodigal love!**

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<sup>2</sup> I owe clarity of thought and some of these actual phrases to David J. Lose's article "The Prodigal God" at . . . in the meantime, posted February 28, 2016.