

Sermon Lent 4: Luke 15

You probably have lost things many times over. If you are like me, you scold yourself for doing so. But isn't it annoying to lose your glasses or your keys or ...? Today you heard a story about people being lost. It is the third story in a row Jesus told on this theme. He began with a lost sheep. The sheep lost itself, no one put it somewhere. But the story celebrated that the loving shepherd left the ones which were safe and kept looking for the lost one until he found it. We understand it is not the repentance of the sheep but the love of the shepherd which was the message. The second story focused on a woman (St Luke tells us of Jesus caring about the concerns of women into whenever he can) who was looking for a coin. She continued searching until she found it. You are to understand that when you know you are lost God will keep searching for you until God finds you and will celebrate that you have been found. You note that in these two stories, neither the sheep nor the coin shows any remorse or repentance of course; the parables focus on the goodness of God. But Jesus is speaking not just to ordinary local people but to the religious authorities who demand that Jesus should live his life their way. They did not associate with people who were sinful such as those who collect taxes for the Roman government. In the eyes of these religious leaders those sinners were already lost, they were cast out from God's care and love. So, if Jesus was a respected teacher, he should behave as they did. Instead, Jesus was welcoming any one and everyone into community with him. They were upset that their way of living was thus being challenged.

In the same way what is known as "the parable of the prodigal son" is about someone who got lost in his life. You actually might want to rename it as the parable of the loving father. As I reflected again on this parable, I realized the story may have been alien to many listeners as it featured a wealthy man with a large property. But the human angle would have spiked their interest. Upon the father's death the wealth would have gone to the two sons, not evenly, as the custom was to divide a property into an extra portion giving the extra portion to the eldest son. But the younger son had entitlement to a third of the wealth. In the story, he told his father to give him his inheritance which said to the listeners of the story he considered his father already dead. Ouch. As you heard, this son squandered the money on dissolute living. However, a change of heart leading to his repentance followed. He knew he had failed his father and sinned against God. True repentance is changing your life, its realizing you need to live a different way. You know that what you were doing was wrong and sinful. This young man realized that, and no doubt, dirty and shoeless, smelling of pigs (abhorrent to Jews) he headed home. He was only able to speak part of his prepared speech of remorse before his father enveloped him in a loving embrace. His father was the happiest man alive at that point; this son who had been assumed lost from home or even dead, had returned.

I invite you to think about your own life and the times you did wrong as a child. When your dad/mom knew about it did they give you a big hug and celebrated you had confessed, or send you to your room while they decided on a suitable punishment? Was there always a penalty for bad behavior? Did you expect one? In this story the younger son knew he has sinned and was completely prepared to be punished. But the father showed love and forgiveness in response to this son who had returned home, helpless, and forlorn, knowing he had failed. The last thing this son expected was to be treated like royalty, to be dressed lavishly and given a celebratory party. How do you feel at this point about Jesus' story? Are you rejoicing in the happiness this son's return had brought the father? Do you worry that he is over-generous or are you celebrating too? Yes, there was a party thrown that evening. Although we are not sure who was invited. But one person who was not invited was the older son. He

finished his working day and returned home from the field to hear music and revelry. When he heard the party had been quickly arranged to celebrate the return of his younger brother, he was angry. He was very angry that this other son, the one who had sinned so much was being celebrated upon his return. I am sure you have sympathy with this son and see his point of view. He had continued to work for his father without ceasing and had never been rewarded with a celebration or a party. I guess if parties are only for those returning, I should not expect one when I leave!

But life often seems unfair, doesn't it? Did those who did the clean-up day yesterday complain that others were not being there? Did those who worked in the thrift shop this past week complain about others not helping? While I hear these volunteers wishing others would come, they are not complaining about them. They just accept it is the way it is. In the same way those who give a large pledge do not complain about those who don't. Every year at the Diocesan Convention we get a handout giving a list of all the churches in the diocese and two pieces of information. One is their total operating income and the other their pledge % to the diocese. I feel good that we pledge 12%, which puts us in the "positive" quartile. You know that life is not fair in the sense everyone does not have the same gifts, the same resources, the same wealth, the same experiences, the same opportunities, in fact, the same "anything."

What the elder son in the story was asked to accept was that the father celebrated the return of his son who had been assumed lost and even dead. You heard that the elder son was too angry to go into the party, so the father left the party to remonstrate with him. The father heard this elder son's anger; how he had served his father all his life conscientiously and in return had received no favors, no party, no celebration of any sort. He exploded in wrath telling his father that when "this son of yours came home you killed the fatted calf." You note that his returning brother was no longer a brother to him but "this son of yours." The father heard his anger of course but reminded him that the younger son would not inherit any wealth. That son had already received his inheritance. You note that Jesus intentionally did not include what happened when the father died, and the elder son had complete control. That was not in the story. But Jesus wanted his listeners to hear that the father was celebrating the return of the son who had been lost. The focus is not to be on the brothers but on the love of the father for the one who had been lost had repented and returned home.

Unlike the earlier two stories, this one is about repentance. The younger son intentionally went home and expected to be treated like a sinner and not an honored son. What the story tells us is beautiful in that whenever you know you have done wrong, when you have sinned, you can confess to God and know that God will forgive you. You could call the story the parable of the forgiving and loving father. It would be a more fitting title, I think. If you are feeling that the elder son was badly criticized, and your experience of life aligns you with him I suggest you pause and think. The elder son showed himself to be lost too. He wanted punishment for his prodigal brother (prodigal means wasteful) He did not understand forgiveness and love. His own sense of correctness and justice left him unable to see another way. What his father showed him was that by love and forgiveness the younger son was offered a new way to be.

Those who heard this story, this parable, might have enjoyed it as a story. Those who knew that the religious authorities labeled them as sinners would have felt it was told especially for them. Is it special for you?

So today I invite you to thank God for that love which accepts you, forgives you, welcomes you from wherever you have been and in spite of what you have done. You are welcome any time to make confession, privately, alone with me or another priest, knowing God will absolve you. Remember God loves you, loved you yesterday, loves you today and will love you forever. Amen.