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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 27, 2022

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 5:1-3, 11b-32

This is one of those days that I think for my sermon I could read the gospel, say Amen, and sit down. This beautiful gospel story of the prodigal son so perfectly describes the human condition and the God's extravagant mercy and grace. The gospel really preaches itself. But perhaps the one thing I want to help us think about today is the **why** of this parable and all the characters in it. Why did Jesus tell it, why do the older and younger son act as they do, why does the father choose to offer grace, and why can we relate so well to each of them?

The beginning of the gospel text from Luke 15 that we heard today starts with verses 1–3: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable.” And then the text skips to verse 11 when we hear the parable known as the prodigal son. What we didn't hear today are the other 2 other parables in verses 4–10: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. In both parables, the owners of the sheep and of the coin leave and upturn everything else to find what is lost. And after what was lost is found, there is rejoicing.

Well in the parable of the prodigal son, there are not one, not two, but three stories of those who are lost—the younger son of course, the older son, and yes, even the father. I'll explain, but first a story that I may have shared before.

When I was a campus pastor I did a lot of pastoral care with students from California Polytechnic University. At Cal Poly when students

apply to the university, they also apply to a major, so at age 17 or 18 when they're filling out their college application, they're basically having to decide what they want to do for the rest of their lives. And, as you can imagine, once students start taking upper-level classes in their major, 2 or 3 years into their college career, sometimes they realize, wait a minute, this is NOT what I expected this major to be, and I do NOT want to do this. And usually, they then need to start over in a new major in a new college within the university, which, of course, means a lot more tuition money.

The most pastoral care I did was for these students who came to me and said, “My parents are going to kill me. They'll think I've come to school and squandered away the tens of thousands of dollars they've already paid for my schooling.” These students weren't trying to do anything disobedient toward their parents. Instead, they had finally “come into themselves”—realizing who they truly were, and who they truly weren't. These students had been lost in the major they originally declared, but when they released themselves from what they thought they should do and be, they finally came to themselves. Over the years I watched those students claim who they really were, and they flourished. What had been lost was found.

In many ways, the younger son in this parable had lost who he really was—obviously he was a beloved son, living in a well-off family that included property, robes, jewelry and shoes, fatted calves, and even hired hands. So when he made a poor decision to squander his part of his father's inheritance, he ended up far from who he knew himself to be, destitute and working to feed the pigs.

But it was while he was wishing even for the pods that the pigs were eating, that the gospel in verse 17 says “He came to himself”—like those students at Cal Poly, he realized who he truly was and who he truly wasn't. He was even willing to go back to his father as something *less* than who he truly was, a hired hand, and yet he was welcomed

back as wholly beloved, completely forgiven, celebrated for his return. The father even said at the end that his son was dead and has come to life. What had been lost was found.

I wonder if we can relate to the younger son when we realize that we aren't living as who we truly are either, whether in terms of vocation, gender, sexuality, relationships, addiction, or life path. When we are lost because we are not living as who we are or could be, we find freedom when we "come to ourselves" as the younger son did, when we are honest about who we really are. That is how we, too, are found.

Now most of us think that the prodigal son—the wasteful son—in this parable is the younger one who wasted his inheritance, but it could just as easily refer to the older son, too. The older son—who complained to his father about his younger brother being celebrated—was wasteful because he squandered his sense of purpose and relationship with his family. He was lost in legalism and resentment, even though he had a job, a secure place in the household, and closeness with his father. Even as he complained, his father told him, "All that is mine is yours." The extravagance of the father was equally given to both sons. Although we don't get to hear the end of the story—whether he went inside to his brother's party—we do know that the older son was also found by his father's grace, regardless if he joined the celebration for his brother or not.

But it's perhaps most powerful to think of how the father in this parable was lost. Do you remember at the beginning of the parable how the younger son said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." Basically, the father is lost to the younger son because asking for his share of the property before his father's death was the equivalent of saying, "I wish you were dead."

And yet even when the son rejects the father, the father still loves him and runs to him. I know I've heard many stories from several of you who grieve over a family member or dear friend who has turned

away from the church or even from God. And so I hope this gospel passage gives you some comfort and peace. One of the reasons Jesus tells this parable is to assure us that God doesn't lose people even when people lose sight of God. God never relents. God will continue to run to them until one day, in this life or the next, they are embraced by the arms of their merciful savior. When the father is lost to the son, the father is found by offering grace.

I believe Jesus told this parable for all those who are lost—the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled at him, the tax collectors and sinners he was eating with, and yes, even you and me. He told it to show us that it is within the mercy and grace of God that we find who we really are, that we come to ourselves. God is constantly inviting us to the celebration, running to us in our most destitute state, offering delights and new life that we cannot take for granted.

This Lent, when you are lost, may you be overcome by the mercy and grace of God, so that you too may be found. Amen.