

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Luke 15: 1-2, 11-32

Lost things. Jesus tells three parables in rapid succession about lost things. These parables were sparked by the complaints of the scribes and Pharisees. They were grumbling and taking issue with the fact that Jesus was attracting sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and gentiles; the crowds attracted to his ministry had the eclectic-ness of a Saturday in Manitou Springs, or Woodstock, NY -- colors, and smells, eccentric, and disheveled. And furthermore, Jesus was eating with them. He was sharing table fellowship with them, honoring their hospitality. He dipped his hand in the same dish as the unclean, had his hands and feet washed by guilty hands, chose to be associated with them, and formed bonds of friendship and community with them.

Lost. This word or its use in our expressions can evoke different things. There are lost causes. There are people who we may deem as lost, as in a negative evaluation of their life choices. But Jesus tells three parables that portray these lost people as in a treasure, something of value, that is, something lost that warrants searching and dramatic action.

So Jesus responds to their criticism. He responds not with explanation but with story and parable. Jesus tells the story of a lost sheep and a shepherd whose heart was so troubled that the shepherd does a rather un-shepherdly thing; rather than accepting his losses, he leaves the ninety-nine and goes after that one. Then he tells a story about a woman with ten coins who loses one in her house and she searches and searches for it until she finds it and when she does find it, she calls all her neighbors together to celebrate. “Just so, I tell you,” Jesus says, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Then Jesus tells this beautiful and carefully crafted story of a Father with two sons, and the one went away. “This son of mine was lost,” he says. “He was dead.” And the father who ought to punish and chastise instead grants this lost child his portion of the inheritance and this child goes away. But the father watches down the road, he waits, and at the right time, when he sees the son in the distance, he runs, he makes a scene of himself; this prominent man in the community does not sit in dignity but runs and throws himself on his rebellious son in love. He shows emotion, kisses and tears flying, and kills the fatted calf, and calls all not to shame this son who shamed this community, but to celebrate, for this son of mine was dead, but is alive again; he was lost, but now is found.

The story has culminated. It is a perfectly symmetrical story, beginning with a child lost, where the family's resources are wasted on this son in shame and disgrace. And it ends with the family's resources being spent in joyful celebration as this child who was lost is found. The story culminates, and this series of three culminates; three lost things found! But the story continues...

Suddenly, we realize a small detail, which unsettles this story which had seemed to close off so perfectly. We learn that somebody is not at the banquet. If you remember, the father had turned the tables on the community. Traditionally, to honor the father would have meant to shame this shameful son on his return to the community. But the father turns it and hosts a feast in his son's honor and invites the whole community. This means that to honor the father, you must come and celebrate this son who had acted so vilely, come celebrate this son who was dead to the family, but now is alive, who was lost but now is found. So it seems like a happy resolution, except that now we realize that someone is missing, and their empty seat would cast a shadow over all of it. It is the eldest son. His seat would be near the father at the table. And everyone there to honor the father and his lost son would be excruciatingly aware that the older son is not there.

The older son was so busy being the responsible son that he never got the memo. The father was so busy pulling this maneuver on the community that he never communicated this to the eldest son. And in the story's artful maneuvering, we have a reversal, a switching of places. The focus shifts from the younger son to the older son's absence. Everyone is focused now on how older son is not in the house and not at the banquet. It is Jesus' way of putting the question to the Pharisees and Scribes. Enough of these "lost" ones I have chosen to welcome, what about you?

At the beginning of the parable, the older son was the one who stayed at home, was the one to honor the father, to fulfill his roles and expectations, to defer his satisfaction, to deny his own cravings for the indulgences of life. He is the one who stayed home at the father's side, while the younger of the two brothers went off, far away, out into the world, separated from the father by distance, by insult, by resentment. Now the younger son is by the father's side, seated at the table, hosting the community. And it is the older son, the responsible, dutiful son, out in the field and marked by distance, insult, and resentment.

Jesus catches his hearers, as this story continues, as this series of three lost ones now becomes 3 + 1 more. One more lost son is separated from the father and is out in the field, and that lost one is of value also. It is a turn, a surprise. We all knew that one can become lost when one leaves, turns away in wild living, spurns the

relationship, cuts off contact, and wastes the blessings one has been given. But apparently, Apparently!, one can also become lost without ever really leaving home, without calling attention to oneself. One can become lost without voicing one's resentment and anger, without spurning the relationship, cutting off contact, or wasting the blessing.

The older son hears the music and the singing. He hears the laughter. But instead of coming close to the house to inquire, he summons a servant to discover what has transpired. He remains at a distance, and he refuses to go in. He grows angry. His trigger has been tripped. He has been the one who has been home doing everything that needed to be done while his brother and others have been off having fun, indulging themselves, and wasting resources. He has been the one tithing while others bought new cars and boats. He is the one who has been doing the work, filling the needs while others have been too busy, too many other commitments. He has been the faithful, dutiful one. And when he and his father do face-off, out it will come...

'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.'

Have you ever felt take for granted? Assumed? Frustrated with your brother, sister, or friend, but couldn't quite pinpoint why they irritated you so? This son was the closest to the father in proximity; he was the most honoring of the father in his choices, in his time, in his effort; yet he too had lost relationship. He, too, felt estranged. He, too, resented. He, too, wanted to party. He, too, felt like a slave, like a slave, you have never... honored... me. If you remember, the younger son was ready to come home and accept the lowered and shamed status of a slave, and yet here the older son feels like a slave, and has been working like a slave.

This older son will stand immovable and resistant. The father once again looks impotent and foolish before his community in his own house. He will get up from his seat at his own table, at his own banquet, in sight of all, and leave to go out to this son who refuses to come in. Now with the first son, despite the scene it caused, the father's show of grace was enough to carry the son home. Here, with the older son, the father will have to plead. Pleading with an indignant son is almost as embarrassing as running to a rebellious son.

The father will have to plead with him that he is a full heir, that all the father has is his, and always has been. The father will have to plead with him to accept what he has done for the younger brother and to accept and honor what the father chooses

to celebrate. The father will plead with him to accept that despite the distance between them, he has always been, not a slave, but a son, a child, a beloved heir to all that he has.

It is possible to be dutiful, faithful, good, responsible, and chaste and sacrificial with your time and your energy, and the one who gives the money that needs to be given, to volunteer where a volunteer is needed, who does every good and honorable thing – it is possible to be all these things and still be lost. It is possible to be so close, but to lack the relationship, to lack the confidence that you are indeed loved and honored, and that all that the father has is for you too. To do all the responsible things and yet dream of the luxuries and parties others have.

Though they had lingered and fermented for years, these feelings have been exposed and brought out in the moment. But when the father welcomes and includes someone he doesn't think deserves it, it deepens the resentment and bitterness, rather than love and concern for the lost.

Now, if Jesus is depicting God through the the father of the story, he is likely depicting God differently from the perceptions of the Pharisees and Scribes. You see, the story assumes the typical cultural norm; that the father wants to be honored in the way that the older son has for all these years, through honorable actions and service. The Pharisees and Scribes have given their service to God's house, have dedicated themselves to the law, to teaching it, to maintaining standards, to seeking the clean, and putting away the unclean. They have honored God in formal ways, assuming that this kind of service God desires, and protecting of God's holiness and honor, keeping the things of God separate from the unholy. And while such chaste and moral choices and motives are honorable, this story depicts a father that is no typical father in many respects.

This father is not as nearly as consumed with honor, image, purity, separateness, and keeping away the unclean and messy. This father's love causes him to act in ways that are unbecoming in that old model. This father shows grace, granting things to those that don't deserve them. He desires a relationship with his sons, so much so that he will accept the rebuke of his sons and will press through it for the relationship and for the love for that is what he always wanted in the first place. The relationship is more important than his honor. And if the community is going to be able to respect this father, they will have to adjust their expectations. Rather than leaning over and whispering to their neighbor about what a joke this guy is, or rejecting him, they will also have to shift their values.

You see, that is why the father could love and celebrate the younger son. Because his values were different all along. Another thing brought to light is that those who claimed to know the father the best did not understand him all that well. That is the older son. That is the Pharisee and the Scribe. That is us in the moments we stand back and point our fingers at how these others that just don't get it.

With its great maneuvers, this story has taken two dramatically different children and drawn to light the ways that they are actually quite the same. But more so, the scrutiny that began on the younger son is now on the older, more responsible son. Will he come to the banquet, will he accept who his father is, will he seek to restore the relationship, or will he dishonor and spurn the father? How will he respond to the pleading of the father?

The older son displays a common pattern. It is to take all that is unresolved and unpleasant in us and project it on someone else. We externalize things, pushing it all away. And so the older son begins his speech with scorn for the younger son and all his irresponsible and wild choices, and then for the father and his choice to celebrate that son. But what comes out is his own estrangement and dissatisfaction, his own feelings of being a slave and disenfranchised, his own desire for a party and to be celebrated. And how do you love someone like that irresponsible brother or sister whom the father celebrates, if you cannot first accept, if you cannot feel, that the father has always loved you, and that what the father has always wanted more than your service, more than your time and your behavior, and your docile presence, is your relationship; your love.

And so, the older son will have to accept that love and grace towards his own insolence if he can come back to the banquet that celebrates his brother.

The story is nearly closed once again. This second part of the story was launched by that detail of the person missing from the banquet. This second part of the story is just as symmetrical and balanced as the first, so it is pretty noticeable when Jesus stops. The last segment of the story, which would tie it up with a bow, is left off, the end dangling. In the last segment where the older son lets his resentments go, where he too embraces the father, where he too accepts the invitation to the banquet; that part is left off, dangling, causing us to wonder how the son will respond...

And as Jesus stops, the silence resounding where the resolution should be, Jesus looks back at the scribes and the Pharisees..., he looks back at those diligent, industrious, and dutiful children who had honored the father in every way they knew how, who sought to honor the father by shaming those who had brought

shame, by turning away the unclean and the unfaithful, the dirty and disgraceful. They were the ones who had been there in the father's house all these years, working like slaves... maintaining the honor, keeping out those who might dishonor.

Jesus looks at them... he looks... and he wonders if they will hear it, the voice of the father pleading..., pleading..., pleading...

And all God's people said... Amen.