

4th Sunday in Lent (Year C)

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."'

Today's well-known passage from the Gospel of Luke comes from the 15th chapter of the book - a chapter that deals exclusively with "lost things." Chapter 15 is a sermon series, if you will, preached by Jesus that deals with things that are lost and then found. This three-part sermon series is preached in the form of three parables.

The first parable has to do with a shepherd who has lost his sheep.

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.'

The second part of this three-part sermon series has Jesus telling us a parable about a lost coin.

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

And then, the third part of this three-part sermon series is today's story that is commonly called the story of the Prodigal Son.

However, not everyone has chosen to call today's story as such. Some have made the case that this story should not really be called the story of the Prodigal Son but, rather, the story of the Forgiving Father, because the forgiveness of the father is the central gravitas of this story. However, a few days ago, I heard a third option that, while despite being a little wordy, is, in my opinion, the best of all. This title goes like this: "the forgiving father and his two lost sons."

I like this version of the title for two main reasons. The first is that it is appropriate for the wider context of chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke. As we have learned from the reading of all three parables of Jesus' sermon series, chapter 15 is about "lost things." Lost sheep. Lost coins. Lost Sons.

The second reason I like this version of this title is that it emphasizes that the younger son, the one we usually refer to as "the Prodigal," was *not* the only lost person in the parable.

You see, the older son was just as lost as the younger son, albeit in a very different way. The parable fleshes out the younger son's "lostness" in much more detail than the older son's "lostness." In the parable, we are told that the younger son went and squandered his inheritance in "dissolute living" and he hired himself out to feed pigs when a famine struck the land. As the result of having an epiphany of sorts, the younger son "comes to himself" and decides to repent which, literally, means to turn around, and to beg mercy of his father. He comes home with a much-rehearsed speech of penitence and humility but doesn't even get the chance to finish it before the lost has become found and the celebration begins.

The father understands that a party must be thrown. And what is important is to understand that this party is not the younger son's party. No, this is the *father's* party. This is *his* celebration for that which has been found!

And so, the father smothers the younger son with gifts and throws the party of the year with all their friends and family - except, for now, the older brother, who is just now finding his way home from a long day in the fields.

The irony is that just as the older son “finds” his way home, he is immediately lost. Notice his physical placement within the story. The older son does not even enter the party; instead, he stays on the margins and refuses to join the throng. His jealousy forces him into isolation. His bitterness causes him to be lost when everyone else is rejoicing in being found.

The older son’s response is petty and exaggerated, to be sure.

“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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

I find two things of interest in this older son’s commentary to his forgiving father. The first is that he chooses to exaggerate the conditions of his younger brother’s act of squandering. The text does not tell us specifically what the younger brother did to squander his living; the text simply tells us that he squandered it in “dissolute living,” which can mean any number of things. Furthermore, the older son has not yet had a chance to speak with his younger brother. And yet, the older brother feels so incensed that a party is being thrown on his younger brother’s behalf that he insists that the father’s property was devoured by the act of soliciting prostitutes! That’s quite an acute accusation for having such little knowledge of the situation! However, anyone who has siblings will tell you that sometimes exaggeration has a tendency to enter the equation when tensions rise! Because of this truth, the older brother’s “lostness” plants hearsay in his mind!

The other thing I find of interest in the older brother’s commentary is the way he refers to his brother. While speaking to his father, the older brother does not refer to his younger brother as “my brother” but as “this son of yours.” You can hear the resentment in his voice. And not only does this choice of words give evidence of resentment, it proves that the older brother has removed himself from his identity as his younger brother’s brother just as the younger brother had removed himself from the family in the first place.

Perhaps the commentator, Richard B. Vinson, puts it best when he says that “there are various ways to be lost in these parables: misplaced, like a lost coin; inattentive and clueless, like a sheep that nibbles its way away from the flock into a tight spot; headstrong and foolish, like the younger son; angry and unforgiving, like the older brother.”¹

The truth is, we are all lost, in one way or another. Like a lost coin, or a lost sheep, or a lost son, “lostness” is a reality of the human condition. Like the words of my favorite hymn say, “prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love...”

Friends, this Table is where we are found. This Table is where the forgiving father greets the younger brother. This Table is where the same father pleads for the older brother to join the party. This Table is where the lost coin is found. This Table is where the lost sheep is brought back into the fold.

Won’t you come to the Table? To be found? To rejoice? To repent and to return to the God who is standing outside, waiting for you to be found? Won’t you join me at the Table?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Richard Bolling Vinson, *Luke*, The Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Pub., ©2008), 517.