

2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15: 11-32

Grace Congregational United Church of Christ
September 1, 2019 Kim M. Henning
"Lost and Found and Almost Found"

Grace to you and peace from God who comes to us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

Jesus begins 'ever so gently.' There was a shepherd who was entrusted with one hundred sheep. Now one day our shepherd counted his sheep and he noticed that one was gone. 1,2,3,4.....99. Let's count again. 1,2,3,4.....99. One was missing.

Now Jesus asks, "Which of you, does not leave the ninety-nine in order to go after the one that was lost?" Well, of course you do. Any shepherd worth his salt will search for the lost sheep. You look here, you look there until you find that lost sheep. And when you have found it, you hoist that sheep in your arms like that stained glass window and you dance your way home.

Come, celebrate with me, you announce. Just so, Jesus said, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance.

Jesus begins 'gently.' He tells another parable. There was a woman with ten silver coins. Ten silver coins is the net worth of this woman. One day, one of those coins slips out of her fingers and rolls away.

Well, she still has nine. But one is lost. What is she to do? She lights a lamp. She pulls out her broom and sweeps. She sweeps in places that haven't been swept for a while. And then she hears a 'TING!' She bends and grasps that missing coin.

She shouts to her neighbors, "I found it. I found the missing coin. Just so, Jesus said, there is joy with the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Jesus begins gently. He tells a story of a lost sheep. Simple. He then tells a story of a lost coin. But now Jesus 'ups the ante.'

There was a man who had two sons. (pause) The younger said, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' Give me. He wants out. He wants nothing more to do with father or mother or brother or work..... "Give me the share that belongs to me."

And the father does. The father divides the property, and then the son announces, "I'm out of here." And he gone was.

Jesus' parables are becoming more intense. First we have a lost sheep; one out of a hundred. If you're a business person, you know that 1%, one sheep, is not the end of the world. And neither is a lost coin. Ten years ago the stock market dropped 30%. What do you do? You hold on.

But now Jesus tells us a parable with some emotional depth. A father's son leaves. A father's son says, "I don't need you." It's enough to make you cry. Jesus is not gentle any longer. He's talking about, 'flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones.' "Good bye," the son said

And he does the unthinkable. With a smirk on his face, he lives the sensuous dream. He's kingpin. He's center-of-attention. He flaunts credit cards and money and charm. He's loud. And they all circle round him as long as he's picking up the tab. Then one day the bartender says, "Sir, Your credit card says, 'insufficient funds.'" Poof. The inflated balloon pops.

The story goes from bad to worse. His friends disappear. His popularity vanishes. We have a party of one AND he's hungry. There's no such thing as an entitlement. His one option is to work. The one job he's qualified for is feeding pigs. And one day he realizes the pigs were eating better than he was. And he came to himself.

Oh my. And he came to himself. If ever you've found yourself in with the wrong person in the wrong place doing the wrong thing, those five words are jewels. "And he came to himself." He said, "My father's hired hands are doing better than I. I will go to my father and beg, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son."

And he went towards home. And while he was still a far way off, his father saw him. And he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. It was a son's dream; it was a father's dream; it was God's dream.' "Bring out the fatted calf. Put a ring on his fingers. Get some sandals for those feet. This son of mine was lost, and has now been found."

If you have ever invested yourself with another who has made some poor choices, you know the joy of which this parable speaks. The far county is so alluring, who can resist? The make-believe world of casinos and the internet and illegal drugs and pornography are so enticing, who can say no?

But one day the façade falls. The world is not as enchanted with us as they once appeared to be. The thought of buying friends has phoniness written all over. And the fantasies all dissipate. "And he came to himself."

Thank you, God, for people and love and forgiveness. Amen. But....

But the parable's not over. Jesus began gently, and here we are in the midst of a story that all of us can identify with. We know about terrible choices. We know about the things we can sneak. We know about broken dreams and broken hearts. Why do you think country-western music is so popular?

But Jesus isn't finished. He began gently, but now in the midst of this 'welcome home' party son----the father notices that someone's missing. Say, where's that other son of mine?

He steps outside. And there he was. Now you wouldn't want to see what that father saw. He saw a son red with rage. He saw a son blistering with anger.

"Son, come in. Please. We need you. We want you. We have food. We have neighbors. We have something great to celebrate."

"You've got to be kidding, Dad. Listen! For all these years I've been working like a slave. I've never disobeyed. I've never done what this other son of yours has done. And for whom have you killed the fatted calf, not for me. No. Where's my party? I've never stepped outside the

box. Where's my banquet? I've never left you, and here you are breaking the bank for that son of yours who nearly wrecked us as a family.

Mark Twain once said that this elder son "was a good man in the worst sense of the word."

Luke 15 wrestles with the topic of being lost and being found. Jesus begins gently: you lose a sheep, you find a sheep; you lose a coin, you find a coin. Using those simple stories, Jesus tells of the joy of God--when there is repentance. Then Jesus tells a story of a son, a real live person who has messed up. If there are 150 people here we have 150 stories of lost and broken human beings trying to hold the pieces together.

But Jesus is not done. At the end of this story, we have a staunch, righteous person who has built a wall between him and the rest of humanity. He's angry. He has no relationship with his brother. He seems distant from his Dad. He seems not to recognize the gift of his life or the gift of his father or the gift of a full stomach or the gift of having a place to call home.

In a word, the 15th chapter of Luke concludes with a son who is standing outside the banquet hall, who knows nothing of the pain his brother has gone through, who seems to know nothing of empathy or compassion or the pains some endure. Wrestle with this story, and there is one conclusion to reach at the end. This elder son is lost.

Now when you or I tell a story about someone who is lost, our minds quickly go to bad places, the stuff others just can't wait to hear about. But when Jesus talks about being lost at the end of this story, he identifies pride as being the sin that leaves the elder brother outside the party. The elder son has no need to repent—in his mind. The elder son is quite adept at finger-pointing, noticing the sins of others. The elder son seems to say: God, aren't you proud of me? And there was a great distance between that elder son and his father.

I don't know if you noticed, but this parable does not seem to have an ending like, "and they lived happily ever after." Jesus does not seem to finish the parable. We have a son who is angry, arms crossed. And we have a father who stands before him waiting and inviting. And there is a great distance between the two.

Could it be that the parable needs to be finished by us? Could we, with our religiosity be creating a distance between us and God? Could we, with our religiosity be setting ourselves apart from others? "Son," the father pleads, "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."

Will come with me to the party?