

Lutheran Church of the Good shepherd
Lent 4
March 31, 2019

The Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

As a commentator points out, calling this gem of a story “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” only emphasizes the first half of the parable. It is as much about a compassionate father and an angry brother as it is about a prodigal son. What is highlighted in this story are two very different ways of receiving the lost. We really are dealing with two people, two “sons,” two children of their “father,” who are lost.

What does it mean to be “lost”? What does it mean to be “found”? If we have two lost people in this parable, do we finally end up with two found people — or only *one*? These are the questions we, the church of Jesus Christ, desperately need to consider.

What does it mean to be lost? This question, at first glance, is most easily answered by looking at the younger son, the one tradition identifies as the “prodigal.” He is the one who is most obviously lost. His lostness begins with his refusal to recognize himself for who he really is — his father’s son, a member of his father’s family. He wants to set himself apart, cut himself off completely and depart for the exotic “far country.”

How many of us have done just this — left home for a far country, an alluring new land offering exotic new thrills? A place where no one knows us, where we can get away with stuff we can't get away with at home? How many of us have taken everything our parents gave us, free of charge, and expended it in a far country on things we can't have at home? Not all of us, to be sure. But many of us sitting here today are returned prodigals who have spent our time in the far country. We started out in the grand hotels and ended up in the muck of the pigpen. Many of us who are counted now among the faithful began our faith journey as prodigal daughters and sons.

So let's look at this younger son for a moment longer. It is difficult for us, in our day and age, with our cheap grace, our easy morality; with children leaving home for college, for new lives, setting up housekeeping in various far countries for various reasons — it's difficult for us to appreciate the drastic nature of this prodigal son's departure. Asking his father for his share in the inheritance while his father is still alive, in that place and at that time, was the same as wishing his father to be dead. Moreover, he was relinquishing any future claim to his father's estate.

In making the choices that he makes, the younger son truly becomes lost, in every sense of the word. He is cutting himself off entirely from everything he knows — family, faith and heritage. In the foreign country, he cuts all ties to the ethics and way of life of his past.

In short order, he has spent everything and is reduced to feeding pigs (needless to say, feeding swine was the abomination of abominations in the Jewish culture of the time), and not only feeding them, but reduced to having to eat what they ate. He was in a strange land. No one knew him well, or wanted to. He was out of money and, hence, out of friends. No one owed him anything, no one gave him anything — that’s how it works in the far country outside God’s household. Nobody wished him dead, as he had wished his father dead and out of his life. No. No one *cared* one way or the other whether he lived *or* died. He is truly lost — as lost as you can get.

And then, what happens? To state it as succinctly as possible, the young man becomes *un*-lost! How does he accomplish this? Well, step number one is coming to the realization that he is indeed lost! In the words of the text, he “came to himself.” He came to realize just who he was, and who he was not. He reclaimed his identity as his father’s son, a citizen not of this illusory far country but of his father’s household. In the commentator’s words, he “affirms the human capacity to renounce foolish error and reclaim one’s heritage and potential.”

The young man, up to his neck in the muck of the pigpen, comes to himself. Then, after coming to himself, after reclaiming his identity, he decides to do something about it. He decides that he will arise and *go*. He will return to his home, go back to his father, back to his mother, back to the ideal parents who love him unconditionally.

We all know the rest of the story, but let me highlight some of the details. His father is described as peering down the road, anxiously hoping for his son's return. When he sees him coming from way far away, the father leaps to his feet and goes running to meet him. "In ancient Palestine, it was regarded as unbecoming — a loss of dignity — for a grown man to run," a commentator says. And yet, run he does. This father — who, as we all know, is a stand-in for almighty God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth — leaps to his feet, hikes up his robe and goes *running* to meet his returning son.

Picture it! This is how God welcomes those we just love to call *slime bags* and *sleaze balls* and *jerks!* The smell of the pigs and the muck of the pen are still hanging off of this prodigal son, and the father goes running to meet him. He hugs him. He kisses him. He doesn't even give him a chance to recite the speech of apology that he has prepared for him. "My son who was lost is found! Get him cleaned up and dressed up! Stop working! Stop everything! We're having a party!" This is how it is, when the lost return to God.

But wait a minute. The story doesn't end there. There's another character waiting in the wings. Ah, yes! Another character! He's as much of a *character* as the prodigal. Remember, I made a point of saying earlier that not all of us here in this ship of faith started out as prodigals. I said that partly because I didn't want you to feel bad if you didn't. Believe you me, there's nothing to feel bad about if you managed to dodge the prodigal bullet.

But I also want to make a more telling point. If you never were a prodigal, there's a good chance that there's an elder brother lurking in you somewhere. He's out with the sheep; this gentleman wouldn't be caught dead with pigs, of course. He's out tending his father's sheep, and he hears, in the distance, the noise of the party. He goes in, asks a slave what's going on.

"Your lost brother has returned," the slave says, "and your father has thrown a party." And this elder brother stays outside and pouts. He fumes! *This brat, this son of a ...! He's off whoring while I'm here breaking my back to keep this farm running! I do all the work, he goes off and plays and now he wants back again and, and*

"You kill the fatted calf for him!" he yells at his father. We all know this guy! He's got a little room somewhere in every church you'll ever attend, this elder brother. He doesn't ask for much, just a little room off the kitchen or the fellowship hall, and after you've been around a while, he'll call you off to the side and start whispering in your ear: "Look at those people over there! You've been good, you've followed the rules, you've paid your tithes, sent money off to mission projects, hammered nails for Habitat for Humanity, come to worship through the snow when *they* rolled over and pulled the covers up and went back to sleep, and look at them. They get the same privileges you do! One of 'em's even on the board of trustees now, and he's wanting to redesign the altar *your mother* prayed at ...!"

Yeah, we know this guy *way* too well, don't we? What we have here are two ways to receive the lost, two ways to look on our brothers and sisters who have been lost, and who now are found again.

There are three main characters in this story. We can all identify with one of them. Many of us can identify with the younger brother. Many of us can identify with the older brother. Most of us can identify with both.

All of us need to return home. We need to claim the identity God has for us. We need to identify with the "father" in this story. Our prodigal sisters, our prodigal brothers are out there on the road home. Let's get up and run to meet them. Let's have a party waiting for them.