

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
"Lost and Found"  
Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32  
3/10/13

There are some stories in the Bible that are so well known that I even if I only gave you half the title, you could fill in the rest.

Like if I said, "The story of Noah and the \_\_\_\_\_" you'd say Ark.  
And if I said, "The story of Moses crossing the \_\_\_\_\_ Sea" you'd say Red..  
And in the New Testament, if I just said the story of the Good \_\_\_\_\_  
you'd say... Samaritan.

So much is communicated, even in the name we give these stories. In fact, the way we name a story, tells us quite a bit about how we understand its meaning. Like today. Most of us know today's Gospel, as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

And yet this morning, I'd like to have you think of this story with a new name. "The Parable of the Three Prodigals."

We all know the story about the first prodigal...the youngest Son who demanded his share of the inheritance, left home, and went off to a far country, and wasted his money and his life.

He was a prodigal, in the first sense of the word, as defined by Webster's dictionary "a prodigal, one who recklessly wastes his means."

Now in one way, this story of the first prodigal can seem to be a nice, comforting story about the general love of God for sinners. A son went away, sinned, came to his senses, repented, and was received home by a loving father who is like God.

That interpretation does capture the basic shape of this Gospel message. However, there's a lot more going on in this story. If you look at this reading as it's printed in your bulletin you'll notice that almost half of the story, from verse 25 on...deals with the reaction of the elder brother.

And when we really, hear what the elder brother has to say, it makes sense. There is nothing fair about how the father treats his two sons. And so the elder brother lets his father hear about it.

Most of us can understand perfectly well how the older brother's heart sank when he came home from a hard day's work...and he heard the music coming from the open windows of his house.

After all, he had chosen hard work, loyalty, and obedience. This elder brother was, in many ways, what God wants us to be, and what we try to be.

One Sunday, after a sermon on this parable, a member of a church came up to the pastor and said, "Don't you think you're being too hard on the son who stayed home?"

"He was the one who honored his father, wasn't he?"

"Do you blame him for not turning cartwheels, when his brother got the royal treatment?"

I think for us to catch the full force of this story we should be a little offended too.

Isn't it the elder brothers and sisters of this world who keep the farms and businesses running while the prodigals are off somewhere seeing the big city?

As all good parables do, we are now at the point of being ready to be surprised. And the surprise is this: The second prodigal in this story is not the elder brother, it is the Father. In spite of all good reasons to the contrary the Father does not give the youngest son what he deserves. Instead, he foolishly, recklessly, showers his lost son, with unconditional love.

According to Webster, "To be extremely generous, to spend extravagantly," is also what it means to be "prodigal."

And do you know who was most offended by this picture of a prodigal God?

It was the elder brothers of that day: the Scribes and the Pharisees.

You might recall that the Pharisees were the ones who had become so legalistic...

so concerned about following the letter of the law, that they had lost the spirit.

They had lost the capacity to show mercy.

In fact, that's how Luke introduces today's Gospel reading.

Jesus was showing mercy to tax collectors and sinners.

And all the Pharisees and scribes could do was grumble, and say,

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Now think for a minute, who would Jesus be associating with in our society today?

What the kind of person today, that would cause some Christians to grumble?

Who would really raise your eyebrows if they walked into church this morning?

And what if it was someone has led a pretty wild life...and they come stumbling in here high as a kite?

And what if Jesus was here too...and after worship...instead of going outside on the patio to have a cup of coffee with us...what if Jesus chose to hang out with our guest instead?

Would we be tempted, like the elder brother, to be a little jealous...or resentful...that Jesus would spend his time with that person, instead of us?

That's the struggle for those of us who identify with the elder brother.

In Romans, Paul reminds us that "we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God." which brings us to the third prodigal in this story.

You and I are that third prodigal.

Every day, whether in the self-righteous, anger of the elder brother...

...or in a rebellion that takes us away from our Father's house, we are prodigals.

Both in our failure to show mercy... and in our rebellion,  
each day we are engaged in wasting the inheritance God has given us.

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There is a movie that really brings home the message of today's parable.

In this movie, a teenage boy ran away from his suburban home,  
after having a terrible fight with his parents.

He told his mother and father that he would never see them again, and slammed the door behind him. He moved into a rundown apartment, quickly spent the money he had, and to make a long story short, experienced a life that he soon began to hate.

Months had passed by, and the boy wanted very much to return home, but he could not bear to make that phone call to his parents. He was so ashamed of what he had done. So he wrote a letter, and in that letter he said, "Mom, and Dad, I want to come home. I have really messed up, and more than anything I wish I could come home." But I understand if you will not allow it.

On Saturday night, I will come by the house.  
If you want me to come home, just leave the little porch light lit.  
If it is not on, I will not come in. "I love you" Signed, "Your son."

Saturday night came, and as he walked to the corner of his street, he paused before he looked toward his house. He prayed he would see that little porch light on. As he turned the corner, he was almost blinded by light pouring out from his home. In addition to the porch light, every light in that house was shining brightly.

His Mom and Dad were standing on the porch.....with candles in their hands waiting for their son.

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This morning, I proclaim to you, that Jesus Christ is the light of this world.  
Jesus Christ is the light... shining into our darkness.

Whether you have spent time wandering away, like the Prodigal younger son,  
...or have stayed home and experienced the hardened heart of the Prodigal elder brother,  
Christ is the one who shines in your darkness.

Wherever you have been, wherever you are this morning,  
the welcoming hands of our loving and gracious Heavenly Father are inviting you home.

Welcome home—join the celebration.  
Come and receive His forgiveness.

In Christ, we are a new creation.  
The old has passed away, behold everything has become new! Amen.