

Lost and Found

March 27, 2022

Luke 15: 1-3 and 11b-32

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable... ¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰ 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.

²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.’”

2nd Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.



Our main passage for today comes from Luke 15. It is a story about wanting and about searching for what seems lost but is often within reach if we only knew how to ask or, in some

cases, if we only could bring ourselves to ask. It is a story about grace and mercy and forgiveness and love. It is a story about disobedience and disrespect, about honesty and self-understanding. It is a story that goes by different names: the prodigal son, the loving father, the older brother. Because of the depth and breadth of this story, we can all find our places within the story – at times here, another time there. This week’s other readings – from Joshua 5 and Psalm 32 and 2nd Corinthians 5 – also revolve around these themes of God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness and love. We will take time to connect these passages into our Luke 15 passage. It can be hard to extend mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness to all people. We can question whether “those people” are worthy of God’s or of our mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness – like in last week’s gospel text when those present struggled with the ‘sinners’ who died unfortunate deaths. We can fail to see or live out the reality that Jesus longs to gather those outside our doors, those not like us up under his wings. These are not easy things to practice.



As we prepare to explore the idea of how we are lost and found, let us begin with a word of prayer...



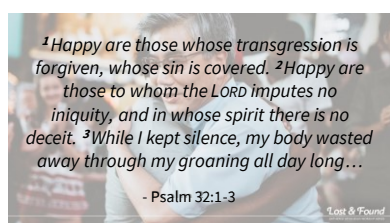
The story of the prodigal son. It is such a familiar story to us.

In the big sense, this is also the story of the Israelite's time in the wilderness. For 40 years Moses led the people. So often they wanted for more, wanted for more than they had. They longed for food and God provided manna. They grew tired of that and longed for more. So, God then provided quail. They grumbled about water and God provided water from the rock. They wanted a leader but often grumbled against Moses. They built an idol to worship because Moses was too long up the mountain. Yet over and over God was merciful and forgiving, loving and caring. Over the course of 40 years, God was at work, refining and shaping the people. As we turn to Joshua 5, we pick up the story as the wilderness journey ends, as the Israelites are about to take possession of the Promised Land.

After crossing the Jordan River on dry ground, the people celebrate the Passover. Joshua led them to celebrate Passover as a way to remember God's deliverance from slavery. The adult males had been circumcised before crossing the Jordan. Circumcision was a physical symbol of belonging to God and to the family of God. In verse 5 God tells them, *"Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt."* On the brink of taking hold of God's promised land of abundance, God removes the shame and disgrace of their time in Egypt. Looking forward instead of back, looking up instead of down, the people celebrate the Passover as a remembrance of God's saving and redeeming power as they are about to claim what God had pledged to them.

This celebration is like the party that the father threw for his younger son. In running to him, in throwing his arms around him, in welcoming him back unconditionally, the father rolled away the shame and disgrace of his son's foray into wild living in a land far away.

We began worship today with the reading of Psalm 32. As was the case with the people wandering in the wilderness, as was the case with the prodigal son, as is the case with you and me when we turn from our sinful ways, God is mighty to save. Turn to Psalm 32 with me as we read these words again, this time imagining them as being spoken by the prodigal son.



“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept

silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long...” Imagine what it would feel like to be welcomed back home. Imagine what it would feel like to be embraced by a father that you had totally disrespected and disgraced. That's what the younger son did when he asked for his share of the inheritance. He was telling his father that he wished his father was dead so that he could just get on with his own life. Breaking tradition and bringing disgrace upon himself, the father gives his son his share of the estate. This is the same father who later offers forgiveness when none was deserved; the same one that does not give conditions for reinstatement into the family. When the son was wasting away, knee deep in pig slop, belly rumbling from hunger, he knew the groaning that David writes of in this Psalm.

Connect to this place of desperation as we read verse 4: *“For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.”* We have all felt like David feels here, like the prodigal son felt when he hit rock bottom, knee deep in slop. When we get to this place, when we realize where we’ve gotten ourselves, it is often only then that we will finally turn to the Lord.

Hear the heart of repentance as we continue on into verse 5:

“Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” After coming to God and confessing his sin, David received God’s mercy and grace and forgiveness. So too did the younger son.

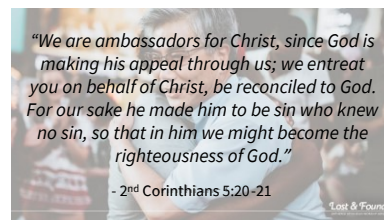
Later in the Psalm, in verse 8, we read of the restored relationship. To the one who was one lost and is now found, God says, *“I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”* God returns to the relationship, leading and guiding David. I imagine that is what happened with the father and younger son in our story from Luke 15. In verse 10 of the Psalm we read, *“Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.”* This is the place that David and the younger son enjoyed after humbly admitting their wandering ways and seeking to once again dwell in right relationship with God. We too enjoy God’s steadfast love when we repent of our sinful ways and seek to walk in right relationship with God.



It is because each time we repent and turn back to God, we are made new again. That is the core message of Paul's writing in 2nd Corinthians 5. Please join me there as we continue to delve down into the depths of God's mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness. Leading into today's passage, Paul speaks of the fact that all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Seeking to encourage the Corinthian church and us to live faithfully, Paul reminds us all that *"one has died for all... so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."* This was the transition made by the prodigal son. His wanting for the things of this world shifted. He realized what really mattered in life. His selfish wanting died and became a wanting to belong, to be secure, to know love. He chose to humble himself and to return home, wanting to be reconciled to his family.

In our passage from 2nd Corinthians, Paul describes the process this way: *"the old has passed away; see, everything has become new."* The desires of the flesh die away and are replaced with a desire to be in relationship – with God and with one another. From this new perspective, when we are changed, we *"no longer regard anyone from a human point of view."* Instead, we begin to see each other through Christ's eyes, to love each other with Christ's heart. While this sounds wonderful, very Christlike indeed, what does it take to actually regard others from this point of view? What does it take to see all others – even and especially those who are different from us – with the eyes of Christ? Maybe more importantly, what does it take to love one another with the heart of Christ?

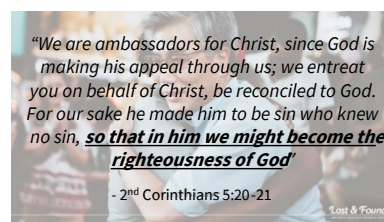
We begin to understand what it takes to love this way, to have what Paul calls a “ministry of reconciliation” as we press on into verses 20 and 21. Here we read, “We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In order to unpack these verses, let us begin with a definition of ‘ambassador’.



Webster defines it this way: “an official envoy... an authorized representative or messenger.” Paul says that we are official envoys, authorized representatives of Jesus Christ. What makes us official, authorized? It begins with our baptism into Christ and continues with our profession of faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.



In a general sense, it comes from walking faithfully with Christ day by day. Anyone can talk the talk. We gain the official, authorized status when we truly walk the walk – daily and faithfully living as Christ’s representative in the world, daily and faithfully practicing Christ’s love in the world, daily and faithfully sharing God’s mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness. To be an ambassador for Christ we take square aim and then maintain a steady focus on living as Christ in the world, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That is our aim, our goal, our focus. So that in Christ we can become righteous.

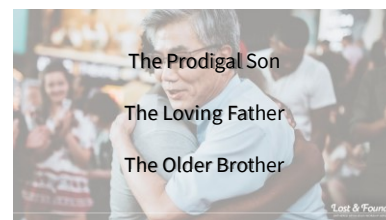


To study an example of what that looks like when lived out, let's return to Luke 15, where we see what a father's gracious welcome, unconditional love, and abundant celebration looks like for a son who was lost and has now been found.



The passage in Luke 15 begins with these words, spoken by the Pharisees and scribes as they grumble about Jesus: *“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”* Is that what people say about you sometimes when they see the crowd that you are hanging with, the crowd that you are being an ambassador for Christ to, hoping and praying that the lost can be found? I hope so. Yes, I hope so.

Then we jump to verse 11, for today skipping by the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep, to the parable of the prodigal son, the loving father, the older brother. We know the story well. We have covered the first option pretty well so far and have touched a little bit on the second option too. We are comfortable with the thought of being the prodigal son – the one who wanders. Friends, we are well-acquainted with sin and with the acts of confession and repentance. It is a familiar road to us all. And we are drawn to the story of the loving father. That's the flip side of our life of sin – God's mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness that is poured out over and over into our lives. We love to envision Jesus running down the road, eager to take us back into his arms, longing to protect us in the shadow of his wings. That's all good stuff, right? Yes, it is!



But can we honestly see ourselves as the loving father? Certainly, yes, if it is our spouse or our children or our good friends who have sinned against us. That's the question to ask here – would've the father run with the same enthusiasm if it were a servant who had run off with his wealth, squandering it in lustful living? Well, if the father represents Jesus or God, then the answer would be 'yes'. Remember, Christ was the one who *"welcomes sinners and eats with them."* To Jesus, did it matter who or what the one who stood before him was or wasn't? No, it absolutely did not.

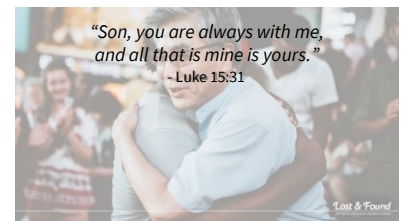
Christ's mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness are unconditional, unmerited, undeserved. Is that how we give out mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness? Do we run to the prodigal, or do we sort of welcome them in or back? Do we fling open the doors for those different than us or do we peek out through a crack in the door, a little reluctant to welcome them in? When the other comes to us and confesses that they have *"sinned against heaven and before you"* do we holler for the ring, shoes, and a robe – signs of belonging and welcome? Do we echo David's words in Psalm 32, begging God to *"surround us with glad cries of deliverance"* as we welcome the prodigal?

Do we offer the other a ring, shoes, a robe - signs of belonging, symbols of being a part of the family, like the physical sign of circumcision was for the Israelites before entering the Promised Land? Is the father's house not the Promised Land for the prodigal son after his time in the wilderness? Is living in a right relationship with God and with one another not the promised land for us, for you and for me? Is the church and this family of God not the promised land for all who are broken and lost?

Like that Passover celebration long ago, the prodigal son and the loving father were reunited, once again together as the family, love abounding. If only the story ended there. Wouldn't it be a nice story! But the story does not end here. In verse 25 we see the older son returning from the field. He has been diligently working – just as he has been doing every single day since his younger brother ran away with his share of the father's estate. He inquires of a servant concerning the party and is told, *"Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound."* The older brother becomes angry and refuses to go inside.

The loving father comes outside, begging his older son to come inside. Spewing hatred from a hardened heart, the older brother refuses. No way. I've been working for years and never once have you given me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. This son – this one *"who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him"* – this son returns, and you bend over backwards for him, welcoming him home unconditionally, loving him like he had never left, redeeming his fallen status by throwing him a party? Why, dad, you're like that guy who *"welcomes sinners and eats with them."* To the older son, this makes no sense.

And how does the father respond to the anger and jealousy spewing forth from the older son? He says, *"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."* Son, I love you too. Son, all this is yours. Every day this is all yours, has always been yours, will always be yours. But the older son never claimed it. He was stuck in his obedience. He was caught up in his anger, his bitterness, his jealousy.



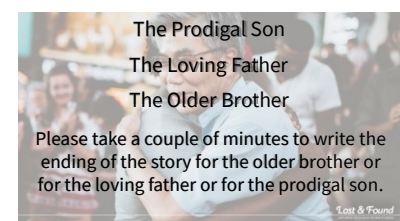
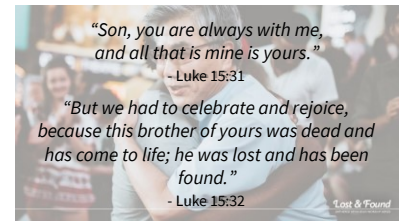
These things kept him from enjoying it all, from living into his own inheritance and into his father's love.

When we find ourselves in this place, feeling trapped in dutiful but reluctant obedience, feeling angry or bitter or jealous because of something that this person or that did or did not do, feeling mad at God because things didn't work out quite as we thought they should, how do we move back into right relationship, back into the place of being an ambassador for Christ? We simply need to remember what led us into this family of God in the first place and to return to what this family offers to all who are lost or are seeking.

It is found in the loving father's words in verse 32: *"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." There is unconditional love in these words. There is undeserved grace. There is limitless mercy. There is forgiveness without end. This is the unrestricted love of God reaching out to save a world in need, to save you and me. This is the heart of God for the lost. It is the celebration in heaven when a lost child has been found.

Here is where the story ends in Luke 15, with verse 32. At this point, I invite you to find a piece of paper and a pen or pencil in one of the racks on the back of the chairs. If you need one or the other, please raise a hand. Please take a couple of minutes to write the ending of the story for the older brother, the loving father, or the prodigal son. Your choice. You pick. What's the rest of the story?



“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.” These are words of love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, welcome. May we go forth seeking to be ambassadors of Christ for the lost and hurting, for the suffering and broken, causing celebrations to erupt in heaven when the lost are found. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you hidden from God? When has God been your hiding place? Which led to more growth? Why?
- 2) *Pray*. Where did God challenge you today? Is it to be more or less like the prodigal son, the loving father, or the older brother? Pray for guidance...
- 3) *Study*. Re-read Psalm 32:1-10. How does confession of sin lead to instruction? How does this lead to being surrounded by God's unfailing love?