

## “Lost and Found”

Luke 15: 11-32

I'm glad you are all here this morning, unlike Tommy and the youth who are having a vacation [a mission trip to Baltimore]. They're working hard and doing hard work. I'll be preaching this morning from Luke 15. The title of the sermon is *Lost and Found*. The text of the sermon is *The Prodigal Son*. I want to remind you before we begin that while this is a story, this is God's word and I pray that you would hear it as such, not just a story, not just words on a page, but the word of God.

<sup>11</sup> *And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

<sup>17</sup> *“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ <sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*

<sup>25</sup> *“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’” (ESV)*

This is probably the most famous story in the whole world. All cultures have some kind of version of this prodigal or returning son. It's very common. I'm sure you all have heard the story before and I hope today that you hear something a little bit different in it because you can miss the point very easily, in fact. I did a class here last fall on parables and we went through this story. I think some of you were in the class. A couple of really important things to know about parables are: one, they are stories but they are stories with a purpose. They connect a spiritual truth with some sort of familiar worldly situation. The point is to tell you and to teach you a spiritual truth by connecting it in that way. They have a specific purpose. You can't take a parable and make it say anything you want to say, although some people do. It's really hard to not do that in some cases because parables remind you of so many other things that you've heard. They remind you of other verses; they remind you of other stories. You have to keep your eye on the context and one of the things that we're going to do is refer back to the beginning of this chapter and to the first ten chapters. Again, if you have a Bible, that will be helpful. But you have to keep your eye on the context especially in this one, otherwise you miss the point and I don't want you to do that.

Speaking of points, we're good Presbyterians and you can all let Tommy know that we're going to have three points today. The first point is the way of the lost, the second point is the truth of the matter, and the third point is the path to life. One thing to get out of the way though: What does *prodigal* mean? We don't use the word with the right meaning often. A lot of times you hear “prodigal” referred to and it means wayward. It doesn't mean wayward. It means recklessly spendthrift, like “You went to Costco and you were recklessly spendthrift.” I think somebody's done that before. So this first point, the way of the lost. The parable starts, “There was a man who had two sons.” Right off the bat you have a clue. There are two sons. There are two ways to be lost as well. One of the sons illustrates one way to be lost; the other son illustrates a second way to be lost. Another thing that often happens with this parable in particular and a lot of stories in general, is that (I do this as well) you tend to insert yourself into the characters of the story. You tend to imagine that you or maybe somebody that you know is the younger brother or the elder brother, when the reality is the younger brother and the elder brother, they represent not individuals but groups of people. And it's important for you to remember that because Jesus starts this chapter giving this parable to groups of people. It's true that it works itself out in individual lives, but it's given to illustrate something about groups of people. Keep that in mind. This younger brother represents this group of people – they don't want anything to do with religion. They don't want anything to do with laws, they don't want anything to do with rules, they are self-indulgent, they are undisciplined, and they are foolish. You know anybody like that? You might. They disobey. This person, this

irreligious person disobeys and leaves. He doesn't want anything to do with the father. But often times what people do with this parable is say, "Well, that's what the parable is about. It's about this younger brother that goes off and leaves and eventually comes back." But you have to look at the end of the parable to see what the point is. At the end of the parable, who's outside? The elder brother. Who's inside? The younger brother. Who's lost now? The elder brother in the end is lost. Just as lost as anybody could be. The elder brother is refusing to come in. The father goes out to try to bring him in and he won't come in. He thinks, "I don't want anything to do with that." He's furious that the younger brother came back. The elder brother represents religious insiders, specifically in this case, the Pharisees. They obey every command and they end up lost. Let's dig a little deeper into this younger brother lostness. Verses 11-16 describe what goes on with this poor fellow.

*<sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

This younger brother didn't want anything to do with the father. He only wanted his inheritance. He essentially would say this to the father, "I don't want your wisdom. I don't want your protection. I don't want your fellowship. I don't want to be your son. I don't want you to be my father. I don't want to wait for my inheritance. I want it now and I wish you were dead." That's the attitude of the younger brother toward the father. He wants control of his life right now and he doesn't want to wait. Younger brothers are like that. They want to be God. They don't want anybody to tell them what to do. They don't want to follow any rules. They don't want to follow any laws. They want to talk on their cell phone while they're driving. They don't eat right or exercise and they don't want to go to church. You know anybody like that? The father's response to this is unimaginable. So this son comes and says, "I wish you were dead. Give me your money!" and the father says, "No way!" No he doesn't. He says, "Here. OK. OK." He doesn't just go into the safe and pull out a bunch of coins. He doesn't go to the bank and he doesn't sign anything over. His wealth is tied up in land. He has to sell a huge amount of his resources in order to give this disobedient younger son what he wants. It's unthinkable that the father would respond this way. Typically in this scenario, in this culture, he'd probably drive him out of the family physically, forcibly, with blows. But he doesn't do that here. He has to sell land. The elder brother would have been entitled to 2/3 of the inheritance - the double portion. The younger brother would have received 1/3. He has to sell a third of his land and put it in a bag for this kid. Unimaginable, yet he does it. So this younger brother does what? Verses 13-16, he squanders it. He's like any young kid that gets a lot of money. He throws it away. And then it's gone and a famine comes on top of that. And where is he then? He's with the pigs. He's outside of the wisdom of the father's care. He's outside of the provision of the father's house. He's outside of the fellowship of the father for sure. He is hungry, he is unclean, and he's all alone, unless he makes friends with the pigs. He's got nobody, he's got nothing. There is a way that seems right to a man but its end is the way to death. This younger brother displays that truth for us. That quote is from Proverbs 14:12.

So the elder brother is lost too. Skip down to verse 25. And we'll go over this just briefly one more time. So this older son was in the field and he came and he drew near to the house and there's music and dancing. It must not have been Presbyterian. He called one of the servants and asked, "What does this mean?" And he said to him, "Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound." And the brother was overjoyed. No he wasn't. He was angry. And he wouldn't go into the party and his father had to come out after him. How insulting, to treat the father that way. He had to come out after him, "Please come into the party. Don't be making such a scene." You've seen that scene play out at the grocery store with a little child and a dad. "Come on, come on." And the son says, "Look! These many years I've served you. I've never disobeyed your command and you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends." What does the elder brother want? He wants control too. He's just going about it a different way. Two ways to get control are displayed here. You can go boldly to the father and say, "Give me your money! Give me my money now." Or you can try to be very very good and obedient so that the father then owes you (or at least you think he does) the things that you want. One way that you can try to put controls on God is to say, "I'll do everything that you ask me to do, and when I've done that you have to give me a good life because I've been good." He is lost as well. He has so much pride in his moral record, this elder brother, that it's the first thing that he points to. Look these many years I served you, I never disobeyed your command. I did everything that you asked me to do. I am so much better than that son of yours, that younger son of yours. Do you know anybody like that - proud of their moral record? They complain about people who don't follow the rules. They complain about people who don't obey the law. They complain about people who talk on their cell phone while they're driving. I'm guilty. They complain about people who don't eat right and exercise and never have any repercussions for that. He says that he served the father but he didn't. Serving somebody is doing what they want you to do. What he was doing is trying to buy rights from the father. That's not service. He doesn't have any love for the father. He doesn't want to be with the father. Ultimately he just wants to get the stuff that the father can offer. I pray that's not why you come to church either, to get the things that God has to offer or desire heaven, because even if you just desire heaven for good health, or being together with family again, but don't want anything to do with God, that's not what

heaven's about, not even endless days of golf. It's about having fellowship with the Father. So this elder brother is lost. He serves out of a desire to fulfill obligation and to get a reward and to get the father in a position so that he thinks he owes him. The other thing that he does is serve in such a way that "If I do this, then I've done what you ask me to do. Now you can't ask me to do anymore because I've already done it." Do you serve in that way? Do you find things to serve in so that you can say, "You know what? I'm serving here and there and now you can't ask me to do more because I'm already serving." That's not the heart of a servant. You're making a purchase, or at least trying to. So both brothers are lost. They both want the same thing. They both want their happiness. They both want control of their lives. They both want their freedom to pursue their own desires. They both want to be rid of the constraints of the father, they're just going about it two different ways. The younger brother seeks this control by demanding his inheritance now, by taking. The elder brother does it by trying to gain control over the father by earning. Neither one wants the father. They're both loved and they're both lost.

In verse 17, we take a look at the truth of the matter and the truth of the matter that while they're both lost, only one of them knows it. And in verse 17 he finds out. It says,

*<sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"<sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father.*

He is lost and he knows it. He is all alone and he knows it (except for the pigs). He is in a far off land, he's got no money, he's got no food, he's got no friends and his eyes are open to it. And that just happens all by itself, right? He just wakes up one morning and that happens. We'll come back to that, so hold on to that thought. He realizes the father's hired servants have more than he has so he says, "You know what? I have a plan. I have an idea. I will go back to my father and I will say that I'm sorry. I will confess my sin before him and I will ask if he will take me back as a hired servant." Not a son, he doesn't get it yet. He says, "I'll go back as a hired servant." And why does he want to be a hired servant? Because hired servants get paid. He'd be a day laborer for his father and he could pay his father back. His plan is to pay off his debt, pay off what he took. That's his plan. But... you know what Tommy [First EPC's senior pastor] says about "but". You just subtract everything that came before. So the second part of version 20,

*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*

So the son is coming, the father sees him, and says, "There's my son. I know that guy." He doesn't do that. He runs to go meet him. In a patriarchal society like this, the father does not run. He struts, if that. Kids run, ladies might run, sons might run, but fathers do not run. The vision going through my head right now is a little scary: it's Bill Cosby. "Look at my land. Look at my house. Look at my stuff." The father was more like that than we give him credit for by reading this quickly and saying, "He runs to him." It's outrageous that he would run to him. So he gets to the son, right? And he says, "So what's your plan? You're back, huh?" No. He doesn't ask for anything. The son has this speech that he's been rehearsing. He's probably nervous. And as he gets there he can see, "Oh gosh! Here comes dad. What am I going to say? What am I going to say?" And the father, out of compassion, hugs him. He embraces him and kisses him before he could say a word. Before he can say, "I'm sorry." Before he can say, "Here's my plan for how I'm going to pay you back." There are no requirements on the son. He came back! The father immediately accepts him back as a son. He calls for the best robe in the house. That's his robe. "Take my robe and put it on him. Put rings on his hand and shoes on his feet. This is not a day laborer. You're my son. I'm taking you back. I don't care what you have to say. It doesn't matter what you have to say. You're back." And then they party. Let the celebration begin. Why do we say nearly every week here, that God always initiates with sinners? We say that because it's true. Now this picture that I just painted is missing something. There's a character that's in play in verse 17. It's the shy person of the Trinity. He's called the Holy Spirit. He doesn't call attention to himself, he calls attention to Jesus. He goes and opens the eyes of this son. He opened your eyes hopefully, to your sin and your need for Christ as the Savior. Ezekial 36: 26-27. One of my favorite passages from the Old Testament goes like this:

*<sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

God does that work. The Holy Spirit does that work. God initiates with sinners. What's required by being welcomed by God to be welcomed by the Father? Come home to Christ. I know people that desperately need to come home to Christ. I imagine you do as well. You don't need to know the doctrine. You need to know that you're a sinner in need of a Savior and that Christ is that Savior. You don't have to have a prepared speech. No plan can make good on your past failures. You have nothing to offer at all because, as you've heard time and again from this stage, Jesus plus nothing equals everything. The real prodigal in this story isn't the younger brother, remember it means recklessly spendthrift, not wayward. The one who gave

the most in this story is not the younger son, it's not the elder brother, it's the father. He spent his honor when the younger brother came and said, "I wish you were dead and I want all your money." He spent his money and he gave it to him. He gave it to the son. He spent his grace on the elder brother stubbornly refusing to come inside to the party and enjoy in the fellowship of the family. In reality outside the story, God is the prodigal. He has spent recklessly by sending his own son, his only son, the son with whom he is well pleased, sending him to this earth to die my death and your death on the cross that you might be reconciled to God. He is the prodigal. He is recklessly spendthrift for you and for me.

A lot of people would say you stop there with this parable, and you can say it can be emotional and sentimental, the younger brother coming home, the father welcoming him back without any conditions. That's a fantastic story. And you've reconciled the younger brother to the father in this story. But somebody else is not reconciled. And in fact the point of this passage is that the elder brother is still outside. The story is given to the sinners and tax collectors who are represented in the story as the younger brother, and the Pharisees who are represented by the elder brother. And they are still outside at the end of the story. It is incomplete. There is something missing. They shouldn't be outside. Somebody should do something. It shouldn't be that way.

Now is when we need to look, just very briefly, at the first ten verses in this chapter. I'll sum them up for you. There are two parables. One is about a hundred sheep. One of the sheep is lost and the shepherd goes and he leaves the ninety-nine and goes and finds the one. He searches, he finds the one, he brings it back and has a party. The lady with the ten coins lost one, she searches for the one, she sweeps her whole house, she finds the one coin, she rejoices, and she has a party. In this story, you've got the younger brother who's lost, who comes home and there's a party. What's missing? There's something missing there isn't there? There's no search. Nobody goes and searches for the younger brother. He's there with the pigs. He's there in the famine. He's got nothing. Nobody searches for the younger brother. They search for a sheep. They search for a coin. But they won't search for a son. It's outrageous and it's wrong. And that's why this parable is so great. That's why it's actually hard as well is because you don't want to think that it ends on this note because it shouldn't. It should resolve, shouldn't it? Just like any good story. It should resolve. Everybody should be together.

But the reality is that the only way that this resolves correctly is if you take the Pharisees out of the role of the elder brother and put in somebody who's a perfect servant. Anybody know who that is? It's Jesus Christ, the perfect servant, the perfect elder brother, the one who leaves the father and goes and in search of the lost. Somebody should have searched for the younger son, for the younger brother. The Pharisees should have gone to the sinners and the tax collectors, but they didn't care. They don't want to. They're worried about their rules and their laws and their talking on their cell phones. But Jesus goes to those who are lost. Jesus is that perfect elder brother. He's the true servant who does the will of another not only when he wants to but even when he doesn't want to. There are examples of that in the Bible. He asked, "Take this burden from me that I don't have to go to the cross." He didn't want to go to the cross. The cross is painful, but he did, for you and for me. Jesus is the one who at great cost to himself goes in search of his siblings. He goes in search of his brothers and sisters, and if you were here last week, if you were in Christ Jesus, you're an adopted brother or sister of Christ. Jesus went in search of you. The beauty of this parable is not that it's complete by itself, but that it's perfectly set up only to be completed by Jesus Christ. Without Jesus in the parable, the younger son follows his own desires. He goes his own way. But Jesus is the way. Without Jesus in the parable the younger son has only this false truth in his heart that he follows. But Jesus is the truth. Without Jesus in the parable neither the younger nor the elder brother have life, but Jesus is the life. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him. Are you going your own way today like the younger brother, trying to just do whatever you want? Are you the elder brother? Are you trying to be extremely good in hopes that the father will owe you? Or are you trusting in the perfect payment of Jesus to forgive your sin and provide your righteousness? I pray that you would consider that question this week.