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Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Luke 15: The Prodigal Son



The 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke begins with the Pharisees and the scribes complaining that Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors and welcomes them. In response, Jesus tells three familiar parables. In the first one, a shepherd leaves his 99 sheep in search of the one that is lost. We are told nothing about if he left the 99 in the care of someone else. The shepherd seeks throughout the desert, finds the lost sheep, and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found what was lost." In the second parable, the woman who has ten coins loses one and she tears the house apart in search of the one lost coin. And upon finding it, she says, "Rejoice with me for I have found what was lost." And the third parable is the one we've read this morning, the well known story of the prodigal son who demanded his inheritance from his father, went off into a foreign land only to squander it all in dissolute living. Eventually he became hungry, even starving, to the point that he considered eating the slop that he was feeding to the pigs. Then, according to the story, he came to himself and remembers his father's home. He rehearses the story of what he will tell his father and heads back home.

Meanwhile, the elder brother is hard at work in the fields. When the father sees his prodigal son coming down the road, he runs for him, embraces him and kisses him, and orders that the fatted calf be killed and that there be a celebration. The father rejoices, for what was lost has been found. All three of these parables depict the joy of God on finding the lost. This goes right to the heart of what the church means by Gospel: Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

That said, in my time in ministry, especially in the Episcopal Church, I've mostly served amongst people who've never gotten seriously lost. After all, we are the church of the presidents; the respectable denomination; the ones who have been successful, who have measured their choices and steadily maintained their sense of responsibility. The word that comes to mind is "careful." Careful with our lives; careful with our decisions. We carefully avoid getting too lost. Which has got me wondering how we read this story today? Who is God for people who haven't been lost?

What about the nine coins that didn't fall between the couch cushions? What about the 99 sheep that didn't stray? A shepherd leaves 99 sheep, apparently defenseless, to go in search for the one? What kind of shepherd would do that? And then finding the lost sheep, he throws it over his shoulders and heads back to the 99 and says, "Rejoice with me for I have found what was lost." The 99 sheep had to be rolling their eyes at this point. Much like the elder brother,

who after another long, hard day working in the fields, keeping the family business going, heads back home, only to hear the sounds of the music and the dancing coming from within. So he calls one of the servants to ask what is going on. The servant says, “Your younger brother spent all his money on prostitutes and dissolute living, and now he’s returned home and your father has thrown a party for him.” And the elder brother has a little problem with this. Yea, I get that.

Many of you know that I grew up in a more evangelical denomination, one that prized the power and immediacy of one’s individual testimony. People would get up in front of the crowd and share their story of radical transformation, and for the most part they followed the familiar outline: Part 1: I was a terrible person; Part 2: Jesus saved me Part 3; I am now a much better person. And sometimes what is also added is that the person will say how they now want to use their life to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. Now to this day, I do not have any doubts about the sincerity or authenticity of these testimonies. As a matter of fact, in just a few moments I’m going to ask each of you to turn to your neighbor and share how Jesus saved you! But these testimonies are powerful because they condense the whole miracle of the Gospel into a story: a story of transformation, renewal, conversion. This is the Christian story.

The Gospel and the grace of God. It’s such a familiar story. If I say, “I once was lost,” you know exactly the line that comes next. “But now I’m found.” This is the Amazing Grace that makes the Gospel good news. But what does grace mean for the elder brother, or sister, or person who has been careful and responsible, who has been practicing justice since childhood? The person who wants to use life to provide for others and to do things that make a difference in the world? Who follows the rules? What does the gospel of grace mean for the people whose sins are, frankly, boring? When elder-brother-types try and confess their sins, they say things like, “Well, ya’ know I really worked too hard.” Or “I didn’t fully maximize my potential.” For the elder brothers, like the scribes and the Pharisees, it’s really hard to make sense of the claim, “I once was lost” or “saved a wretch like me.” I mean, maybe lost in some metaphorical sense, or existential sense. But again, these Pharisees and scribes were living pretty good lives before they met Jesus. So what does the Gospel have to say to those who are good?

That is a difficult question, but I feel like it is an important one. For the people I meet in Lincoln and Concord and our surrounding towns, most of them are good people. They lead good, respectable lives. They are careful with their finances. They are devoted to their family. They

have a presence in the non-profit world, they are generous with their volunteer hours. They are principled, purposeful, intentional. What does Jesus have to offer people who are already good?

That is a question I wrestle with. I really do. And this morning I only have a very partial, modest attempt at an answer. So, the faith teaches that sin is anything that separates us from God. Anything that separates us from our Creator and Redeemer, and thus separates us from life itself. That be squandering your life in dissolute living. But you can also separate yourself from God by insisting on being right. On being dead right. To be dead right is to win the argument but to miss the soul's yearning. The elder brother's argument is that the grace that the father is giving the prodigal son is not fair. But notice, the father does not respond by arguing that it is. Notice that grace is never about getting what you deserve.

Grace is God's wildcard that trumps both our disastrous and our careful choices.

As I read Luke 15, the point of this parable is not to be right; the point is to get into the Father's arms. To feel the Father's embrace and enter the celebration. We know the prodigal made it. And we know that his elder brother was invited. But we don't know if the elder brother arrived into the Sacred Embrace. We don't know if the elder brother chose to enter into the outstretched arms of his father that were always waiting for him. As the father said, "All that I have has always already been yours." Well the story doesn't tell us what the son chose. The story is left unfinished. And in the unfinished story we see an invitation to the hearers to complete the narrative.

The story, as I read it, is not about being right. The story is about being grateful. The elder son must make a primal and difficult decision. Will he try and be right and responsible with his life? Or will he stake out another path? Will he try and achieve his life or will he receive it in gratitude and thankfulness. The story leaves the reader with that simple but radical question: Will you simply receive the love, and the joy, and the calling that can never be deserved but that has always been waiting for you? Will you see that the Sacred Embrace was meant for you, too? Luke 15 is an invitation to write that story with our lives.