

March 31, 2019 Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the fifteenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

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

³So he told them this parable: ^{11b}“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’ ²⁰So 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.’ ”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Yesterday our neighborhood became a sort of scary place. A woman was lost...In fact, I think she is still missing. (Her name is Tonia Henderson if you would like to say a prayer for her and those waiting and hoping for her safe return...as well as everyone looking for her) I was away at a meeting...but Ryan was texting me about the low-flying helicopters...about divers in the neighborhood lake...and a makeshift helipad and command center in a field nearby. It was not an ordinary day.

Then last night I saw a news story about a boy in Cedar Park who was missing. It felt like too much. Thankfully, he has been found now...but it was terrible to imagine how the world must have stopped for his family yesterday...how life must have felt like a glass tumbling towards the ground, about to shatter.

I can't even begin to guess how many hours of labor...how much risk to first responders...and how much money has been spent to search for these precious lost ones...When someone is lost, the park *should* turn into a command center...and I would hope we would use as many helicopters, boats, and tools as we possibly can to bring them home safe.

And that is exactly what Jesus is teaching us in fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel...This text is so well known...many of us were probably transported into a familiar story landscape as soon as we heard those first words: "There was a man who had two sons..."

The Parable of the Prodigal. The prodigal who?

Just to check in...this is not an everyday vocabulary word. It might be hard to use in a sentence (without referencing Luke's gospel). Do you have a definition in your mind? Maybe take a moment to mentally compose one...

The first definition for this adjective...if you google it...is "spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant." Some synonyms are: wasteful, extravagant, spendthrift, improvident, imprudent, immoderate, profligate, thriftless, excessive, intemperate, irresponsible, self-indulgent, reckless, wanton.

I'm not sure the young son is the prodigal one...or at least...I'm not sure he's the only one.

This whole family seems a little extra...to be honest. All of them have excessive, extravagant, and self-indulgent turns...The youngest brother does, of course...He goes and recklessly spends what should be his financial security...the foundation of the rest of his life. But, the father, too, is extravagant...in being willing to part with his wealth while he is still alive...in running out to meet his son without an ounce of dignity or decorum...in the feast he throws. I think even the oldest brother is excessive and self-indulgent, though...out of touch with the appropriate and true measures of his life. He is excessive in work...in self-denial...and in resentment.

The older brother has created such an extreme narrative for his life, he doesn't even know what he has. When the story ends, he complains to his father about how he has worked like a slave and never been given so much as a goat to enjoy a meal with friends. And yet...when the story began...what did the father do? The young son was brazen enough to ask for his inheritance in advance...and it says that the father "divided his property between them." The grammar isn't 100% clear...but it sure sounds like he divided his property between...his two sons. The eldest son already had...everything...

Sometimes, we see rules and limitations and confinement all around us...and...sometimes...we are the ones who've put it there. I have a friend who teaches high school. And she takes almost perverse pleasure in an event that happens almost without fail when second semester starts each year. The students come back from break...and eventually one of them is bold enough to ask... "Can we have new seats for the semester?" Her answer usually blows their minds. She says, "Sure. You know I never assigned you seats to begin with, right?"

Sometimes other people cast us in roles we don't want to play in the world. And then sometimes, we do the same thing to ourselves.

Both sons misplace themselves in the world. And both of them underestimate the power of their father's love to put them back where they belong. The young son is eventually so desperate and ashamed, he believes he can only return as a slave...and the oldest son stays and lives like a slave...maybe because he could never really believe he deserved his father's love to begin with...

But the father doesn't want slaves. (Ok...sidebar...evidently the father does want slaves in the general sense...because they are also characters in the story...and that is part of why we don't just assume everything in the Bible is good and immediately translatable to life in the world now. Slavery is bad. It is something we should not have done to each other...and we shouldn't be ok with it now, either.) But, when it comes to these sons...all the father wants is them...he wants them to be with him...to be his family...to be each other's brothers.

Can you imagine how lonely they were for all those years...the youngest son gone...the oldest son somehow unable to believe how beloved he was...? How broken their father's heart must have been.

And the reconciliation at the end is about all of them, too. The father doesn't only run out like an undignified goofball to greet his young son who returned home...He goes out again from the party to talk to his other son...the one who won't come in.

This parable is not a morality story. We are not supposed to be more like one son or the other...or maybe even like the father. This parable is told in the midst of a whole chapter about lost things...one sheep among 100...one small coin among 10...The overarching point Jesus is making is...if you are lost...God wants nothing more than to find you...you matter...no matter whether you are lost far away from home...or lost in your own back yard...

In fact...I'm going to use this opportune moment in the lectionary to plug a book that comes out in two days...because it was written by a friend and college classmate who is now a Lutheran pastor in Minnesota. Her name is Reverend Emmy Kegler, and her book is called *One Coin Found*...and I can't

even begin to explain how brilliant she is and how excited I am to read her book.

God wants to find us when we are lost. To find the other lost and forgotten ones. God wants to pull us into God's arms and bury God's face in our necks...and say, "I've been so worried about you. I love you so much. I don't ever want to let go of you again."

It makes me wonder...who is lost today? In the gospel of Luke? In our world? Maybe it would be a shorter list to ask: who isn't?

But here is the thing about being lost...

We are not called children of God because we are worthy...or because we have our act together...or because we know our way and don't make mistakes. We are not children of God because we don't get lost. We are children of God because we are loved. And you are not too young...or too old...too damaged...too odd...too vanilla...too resentful...too reckless...too queer...too scared...too wrong...too lost or too far gone to be a child of God. You are not "too" anything...and...neither are the people who confuse us or who we don't like thinking of as our siblings.

This is not a birthright we can lose...but it is one we can share...that we can magnify and reflect to each other. When we are found by God, we can be assured that God will embrace us...and then God will give us back to our siblings, too.

Part of what we get to do after the party is figure out what it means to live as family with the ones who we have resented...forgotten...or written out of our stories. And God will always keep writing us into a story that ends in the wide embrace of God's love. God will always seek us until we are found.

Who is the prodigal? Who is lost? Who isn't?

Dear ones, you are so precious...God will not rest until you are found...until you are in the arms of God. God's a prodigal like that, too.

Thanks be to God. Amen.