

LOOKING FORWARD TO HOME

LUKE 15:1-3, 11b-32

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A subtle distinction at the end of today's parable reveals its life-changing message.

It comes when the father explains to the older son why he has chosen to rejoice and celebrate at the return of the younger son. "This brother of yours was dead and has come to life;" he says, "he was lost and has been found."

Luke is saying there is one condition worse than death and that is being lost; and there is one condition better than life and that is being found. The parable says that the prodigal's transformation, and our transformation by extension, is not just from death to life but from being lost to being found.

Deep in Lent, on our journey toward Holy Week, I'd like to look this morning at what those conditions might mean in the story, in our personal lives and in our church life.

It is helpful to remember that Jesus is telling this story to scribes and Pharisees who represent the spiritual "in crowd." Luke is famous for holding up outsiders and sinners as examples of spiritual renewal and new life.

It's also worth noting how truly lost this boy was. When he squandered his inheritance he squandered more than money. He was squandering his identity. His family name and values were going down the drain along with his trust fund. It is hard for us to appreciate the clear boundary of kosher laws. But the prospect of eating the food of pigs—carob pods—signaled to Jesus' listeners that the boy had rejected his spiritual heritage.

Maybe that's a good definition of being lost—forgetting or throwing away or renouncing our identity, our name and heritage.

In one sense the entire human family has been lost since our departure from the Garden of Eden. What that ancient myth conveys to our wayward species is that when we try to become like God, as the serpent enticed us, we renounce our true identity as God's creatures.

How is it possible that the 20th century was one of the most brutal in the history of civilization with more genocide and ethnic cleansing than any previous century? Humans acting like God, that's how; forgetting in whose image we were created, whose purpose we were called to fulfill.

Not one of us here today as much as we might identify with the father or older brother can deny that part of us is also the prodigal son. We are lost as a species.

We are lost also as a society. The pigsty image works well in 21st century America—the age of conspicuous consumption.

We jostle about in something of a bovine culture. Advertisers see us as a bundle of appetites. The message is that not to satisfy our appetites is foolish asceticism. And

yet, the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger cried out for all of us when he sang, "I can't get no satisfaction." But the fact is we are more than a collection of wild appetites.^[i]

I suspect most of us today can also relate to the experience of being lost within the intimate network of family. Indeed, the universal appeal and power of this parable is the setting Jesus gives it in an ordinary family.

In one of the great American novellas Norman Maclean's, *A River Runs Through It*, which is a true story about a prodigal son but a prodigal who is not found at the end of the story, there is a haunting dialogue at the end of the book.

The father and his older son are discussing for what would be the last time the younger son's death—a death resulting from the young man's wild and reckless living. The father says this, he says, "It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us."^[ii]

And here is the genius of Jesus' parable and Norman Maclean's story—the irony of confusion and disconnect, the irony of being lost in a social structure built on belonging, intimacy and trust. You get the feeling of ships passing in the night.

In Jesus' story the older son completely misreads his father and certainly his younger brother. The younger son is blind to his father's love and compassion. The father himself struggles first to love a younger son who rejects him completely and then an older son who blames him for forgiving his brother.

If there is any doubt that we are a lost species we do not need a biblical myth or over-the-top culture to convince us. All we need is to take a look at the family. "Those we live with and love and should know elude us."

But this is not just a story about being lost. It is a story about being found. And here there is a surprising moment.

In verse 17 Jesus says, "He came to himself." We may be tempted to think that this is where it happens, where the boy is found. But life is a process and while hitting rock bottom gets him thinking he is not yet a changed person.

He is simply hungry and planning a way to get food. He seems to be thinking of one person only—himself. He devises a crafty plan. He'll go home, admit his fault to his father, and request to be treated as one of the hired hands. Surely his father will not deny him that.

But then the real transformation. It comes not in the pigsty but in the arms of his father. He barely gets his planned speech out of his mouth when his father lifts him up and calls for a celebration, a robe, a ring and the fatted calf. It is as radical and remarkable depiction of God's love as the bible contains.

The story is so rich it is impossible to plumb all of its depths. But one thing is clear. This father is all about forgiveness not punishment. What he wants more than anything is his son, back, whole, well, of sound mind.

Note this healing is not without cost. The father, who has already given away a third of his resources, pays for an elaborate party to mark the occasion. Nor is it on the father's tab alone. The older son objecting to his brother's return does not endorse spending anymore of what was *his* inheritance. Why *any* party let alone such an elaborate

party? When you're given your life and family back it's no time to skimp, no time for calculated giving but giving from the heart. That's how God operates.

What does this story mean for the church, for you and me? If you're a prodigal child today's story says go home, God is waiting with open arms. For the rest of the family?

When Abraham Lincoln was asked what he would do with the Confederates once the Civil War was over he said, "I will treat them as if they had never gone away." Somehow the church is called to respond like that to those who are lost within its own family and within the wider community and world.^[iii]

Treat them as if they'd never gone away. Minus the "I told you so." Minus the grudging payback. Opening our arms to the ones who rejected everything we hold dear and did things that still sting or hurt. Surely many of us here know someone in some pigsty of life or already heading over the crest of the hill homeward. Today's parable calls us to be ready to run to meet them.

There's a wonderful story about a prodigal woman who was asked to introduce Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, at a banquet. She happened to be a Habitat home owner after growing up in the projects, subject to a rough life of drugs and violence. And she had a young son who in her old neighborhood refused to speak and was thought to be severely disturbed.

In her introduction she was nervous at first searching for the right words but then she just opened up and said Mr. Fuller was the answer to her long nights of prayer; she said her new home was the answer to thousands of prayers and that her son's responding to a new school and new friends was the answer to unceasing prayer. Then she said "without any further ado, here is Millard Fuller."

The audience, in one of those rare moments, immediately rose in unison to its feet applauding. The master of ceremonies went to the woman who had stepped to the side and assumed they were applauding for Fuller and said, "they're not clapping for him, they're clapping for you."^[iv]

It is something of an irony that we're talking about a prodigal child on a day when we are baptizing three infants of this congregation. What could be further from our minds when we look at them than rebellious and reckless prodigal living?

But what we know is that even these precious children just starting out will have the experience of being lost—as members of the human race, as members of American society, perhaps even one day as members of their own families.

The question is how can we, their church family, instill in them an experience of belonging to a heavenly Father that will turn them toward home when they are in some far off country. How can we like Millard Fuller and that new home and school and neighborhood be the answer to their prayers when they are living in despair like that Habitat mother?

If today's story is any guide, how ever we answer those questions, we can be sure that it will mean spending precious resources and letting go of our concern for image and

convenience. It will mean embracing that which is dirty and broken for the sake of transforming a human life.

And this: we can be sure that few things we do will be more beautiful or lasting.

Ask the man who painted the picture on the cover of your bulletin.* Amen.

* Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal*

- (i) James C. Howell, Pulpit Resources, January – March 2007, 45.
- (ii) Norman Maclean, A River Runs Through It (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1976) 102.
- (iii) Howell, 46
- (iv) Howell, 47