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Lost and Found
Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
March 31, 2019 (4th Sunday in Lent)

Raise your hand if you have heard this story before. Raise your hand if you have heard it more than five times in your life. Raise your hand if you've heard this story so many times that you have completely lost track of how many times you've heard it.

A couple weeks ago, I took some time off of work, and my husband Rod and I drove down to the Flint Hills for a few days. We headed out late one morning from our home up north, and the route was very familiar—237 past Lake Perry, down to Highway 24, and then west on Highway 24 to I70. I have taken that road so many times, I've lost count. I was very relaxed, because I was on vacation. Rod was driving. So just ten or fifteen minutes out, while we were still on Highway 24, I started to nod off. I didn't want to nod off, because I wanted to be present to Rod and our time together. Rod suggested, "Since you're not driving, why don't you see if you can notice something you've never seen before?" So I did, and sure enough, as we drove along, I eventually spotted a few shops, and signs, and homes I had never really noticed before.

When we hear or read a story like this very familiar parable of the man with two sons, it's easy to think we've already heard every insight and every scrap of good news that this story has to offer. But if we stay awake and pay attention, we might notice something new. Here are some things that got my attention in a new way as I spent time with this story this week.

First is the situation that Jesus addresses as he tells this story. What’s going on is that “The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling.” Why? Because Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners, and eats with them. Hmmm . . .

I think when we read the Gospels, we often hear the phrase “Pharisees and scribes,” and think: “Bad Guys.” Opponents who give Jesus a hard time. We don’t have much sympathy for them. But Pharisees were actually very faithful, God-fearing teachers and interpreters of the Torah. They didn’t HATE Jesus—they were fascinated and intrigued by him. One of my New Testament professors liked to remind us that if Jesus had been part of an organized group in those days, he would have been a Pharisee.

The phrase “tax collectors and sinners” is another phrase that seems to have lost its punch over the centuries. Tax collectors made their money from charging people MORE than the actual tax that they owed. They could pocket the difference between what the people paid, and what actually had to be turned over to the government. In other words, they exploited people for personal gain.

And Jesus wasn’t just polite to these folks; he spent meaningful fellowship time with them. Imagine inviting Jesus to join your Dinners for Eight group, and instead of joining your group of compassionate, law-abiding Presbyterians, he goes and has dinner with a few of the parents who participated in that college admissions scandal, and the guy who sells weed at the middle school, and a couple of human traffickers, and Harvey Weinstein. Would you grumble?

It is to the GRUMBLERS, not the sinners, that Jesus tells this parable. That's our first interesting detail.

The second interesting detail requires that I give a shout-out to two church members. Melanie McQuere learned from our church's Women's Bible Study and later shared with me that one aspect of this story that often gets overlooked is the fact that there is a famine in the land where the younger son is living. This is part of the story that readers in third world countries are quick to notice, but that we who live in the United States tend to miss. For us, famines are something we read about that happen to people far away.

So my second shout-out is to Joe Mumford, who loaned me the book The Indifferent Stars Above, by Dan Brown. It's a mesmerizing story about the Donner Party, a group that started out for California from Missouri in 1848. Due to a series of unfortunate choices and events, they became trapped in the snow in the Sierra Nevada, ran out of food, and ended up consuming some of the deceased members of their party in order to survive. Besides being a terrifically well told story, the book vividly describes how hunger and starvation affect your mind and body. Basically, when you are desperate, you might find yourself doing things you never imagined doing.

That's the situation of this younger son. He says to himself, "I am dying of hunger." When I say "I am dying of hunger," that means it's 7 pm and I haven't eaten since lunch. When the younger son says it, he means it. He IS. Dying. Of hunger. Of course nobody will give him anything, because there's a famine; everybody is just trying to keep themselves and their families alive. He doesn't have anybody. In the Donner Party, it was the single young men, traveling alone without family, who died most quickly.

Up to this point, the younger son has done EVERYTHING HE COULD to avoid going home. But now, he realizes if he doesn't get out of there, he's going to die. It's life or death. He plans what to say to his father, with the goal of getting food.

When he is spotted staggering down the road by his father, he is not the same young man who left. He is painfully thin now. Hollow cheeks. Probably missing some teeth, maybe some hair. He smells terrible. Just imagine being a parent and seeing your child in this state.

Which brings us to a third thing we might notice in a fresh way as we hear this story. The father never actually says anything TO his younger son. But he instructs the servants to throw a party, saying: "... this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." He'll say the same thing a bit later to his older son: He. Was. Dead.

Aren't those just the best stories? The ones where the beloved is thought to be dead, or hopelessly lost, but they come back again. Wesley, in the *The Princess Bride*. The two dogs and the cat in *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*. Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. *Castaway*. *Rip Van Winkle*. *The Odyssey*. *Persuasion*. That could be a good party game, to see how many stories you can list which build on the theme that when all hope is gone, the loved one returns.

Speaking of parties . . . the older son is clearly NOT in a party mood. To his father, he says, and this is the fourth observation, "When THIS SON OF YOURS came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes . . ." The older brother can't bring himself to call the younger son his brother.

One night, I was driving home from church down 8th street, getting ready to head on to the on ramp to I70 East. I was at the stoplight at 8th and Monroe, and Monroe is a one way street. You're only supposed to go SOUTH. Well, as I'm crossing Monroe, bearing south, to get to the onramp, here some a car driving NORTH, the WRONG way. And the driver of this car, starts honking at ME, as if I'VE done something wrong. The driver was not only going the wrong way, they didn't even KNOW they were going the wrong way, and consequently behaved like a jerk. That's what this older son is doing, by talking this way to his father, and cutting himself off from his brother. In doing so, HE becomes the one who is lost . . .

And so the fifth and final detail for today is the way the father has to step across the doorway and out of his house two times, once for the younger son, once for the oldest. We KNOW that the younger son had planned to ask his father to treat him like a hired hand instead of a son, but his father won't even let him get the words out. The father also corrects his oldest son, saying, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because THIS BROTHER OF YOURS was dead and has come to life . . ." The father reminds each of his sons: this is a FAMILY. The party is not complete without the whole family.

We are on the home stretch now with our current sermon series. Next week, we have John Haspels in the pulpit to bring us a message about his time as a mission worker in Ethiopia with his wife Gwen. We'll have a final wrap up on Palm Sunday, and then start something new after Easter. But today, we remember again our new mission statement. Say it with me: "Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose." As we explore what it means to live with purpose, we look to Jesus, because our purpose is to become more and more like Christ, and as a church, our purpose is to be the body of Christ in the world.

When we look at today's passage, we see Jesus telling a story to show that the love of God is so much deeper, and stronger, and wider, and the grace of God is so much more amazing than we can understand. God comes looking for all who are lost, whether they are lost in the manner of the younger son, or lost like the older son.

Sometimes, like the younger son, we need to remember the mercy of our father and turn around and head for home. Sometimes, like the older son, we need to remember that the people who offend us the most are also our brothers and sisters, and that when we deny their place in the family of God, we too are lost. But as a church, our job, our purpose is to do what Jesus did—to keep showing people, through our own storytelling, through who we eat with, and who we welcome and how, that God still seeks the lost. And welcomes them home. And throws them parties.

Just as we can't have Christmas Eve without "Silent Night," or Easter morning without "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today," we can't have the story of the Prodigal Son without "Amazing Grace." Let us stand and sing together . . .