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March 10, 2013

Psalm 63: 1-8, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Lost and Not Lost

The parable we heard this morning is usually entitled The Prodigal Son, although some people call it The Running Father or the Story of Two Brothers.

It's so familiar to us that I am going to hazard a guess that some of you didn't really pay attention as _____ was reading it, because you have it pretty much memorized.

And that's okay. But I am going to go ahead and talk about it anyway, just in case there's anyone here who is somewhat less familiar with it. The rest of you, I invite you to listen in, if for no other reason than to make me feel useful.

This parable is one of a group of parables that includes the parables of the sheep and the coin. The scribes and the Pharisees have been grumbling and complaining that Jesus is socializing too much with sinners. Jesus answers their complaints with this set of parables, to let them know how God feels when sinners turn back to God. And so the parables tell us that

When a man loses one sheep out of 100, he goes out and looks for it until he finds it. Then he has a party!

And when a woman loses one coin out of 10, she sweeps the house until she finds it. Then she has a party!

So it seems to follow very logically that the third story is about a father losing one son out of 2, and the father goes out and looks for him until he finds him. Then he has a party!

Except that's not exactly how it goes. And that's not all there is to it!

The father does not go out looking for his younger son. A child running away or deciding that it's time to leave home is different from a child who has gotten lost accidentally. When a child is missing, it's necessary to go out looking, just like so many people search every time a child goes missing, searching and praying that the child will be found safe and sound. We know they can't find their own way home, so we have to look.

But when a child leaves home on their own, even if you can find them and bring them home, they might leave again, especially if nothing has changed there.

So our prodigal son asks for his share of the family fortune and heads out. He doesn't see that there's any reason to stay. Maybe he and his big brother fight all the time, or maybe he's just not into farming. Or maybe he wants to seek his fortune, maybe hit it big on Broadway or in finance, so he heads for the city.

And maybe he did this a few years ago, just as the recession hit. People couldn't afford to go to the theater anymore. Wall Street was flattened. He ended up waiting tables for a bunch of really nasty, piggy type people at a local bar. And he got hungry.

All he had to eat were the pork rinds the dive he worked at put on the table for free. He would have gladly eaten the leftovers from off of the customers' plates, but his boss was watching him like a hawk and told him that it was against the health laws, and he would fire him for it.

So night after night he went to bed hungry.

And one day he realized that he came to the city to find himself and all he found was a bunch of loneliness, poverty, and hunger. So he came to his senses, swallowed his pride, and headed for home.

On the way, he decided that what he would do is live with his father's farmhands, bunk with them, eat in the cafeteria, share the common bathroom. It would be a whole lot better than the way he was living in the city, even if it wouldn't be as cushy as the way he used to live when he was growing up.

So he got on a bus and headed for home. All the way home on the bus he rehearsed his speech. “Father, I’m sorry. I really messed up. I’m not asking you to let me have my old room back. Just let me live with the hired help and work on the farm with them.” And after a few hours he got off the bus in his hometown and started walking out to the farm.

Suddenly he saw someone running toward him! He squinted into the sun, shading his eyes with his hand.

And he couldn’t believe it! He just couldn’t make sense of what he was seeing!! His FATHER!! His DAD was running down the road toward him!! And before he could process this information, his dad was on him, hugging him, kissing him, yelling for the servants to bring a ring, a robe, sandals!

Before he could even get his rehearsed speech all the way out of his mouth, before he could say, "I just want to work for you like any other servant," his dad welcomed him back, not just to the house, but into the family.

"We're having a barbecue!" said Dad! "A huge party! Because you're here, you're alive, you're home again. I was so afraid that something terrible had happened to you, that I would never see you again!"

His father, sitting on the front porch, had seen him coming----had been watching and hoping to see him. His father had NOT gone out looking for him, like the shepherd had actively looked for the sheep and the woman had diligently looked for the coin.

The father had waited for the son to realize that he could always go home again. He had never given up hope that the son would someday return.

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This seems like a nice, warm-fuzzy place for the story to be over,
but there's more.

Instead of running inside to embrace his little brother, he pouts and stews and whines that it's not fair! He takes off and has a great time in the city, and instead of getting the punishment he deserves, he gets a PARTY!!?? No way. Not fair. The old man is so soft, so gullible! And when is it my turn anyway? **I** never get to have a party!

And in the middle of all the fun, all the celebration, the father notices that his older son is not there. And guess what?

Just like the shepherd looks for the sheep and the woman looks for the coin, **this** is the son that the father goes out and looks for!!

The younger boy is welcomed home, not lost any more, but the older son is missing, and the father goes out to find him. Even though he's not lost, the father is concerned, he still wants him at the party. The party is for the whole family and it's just not complete without him!

The older son does not acknowledge his relationship with the prodigal. He calls him “that son of yours,” not “my brother.” There is bad blood between the boys. It may or may not have been there all along,

but it’s certainly there now. Maybe the father favored the younger, or maybe the two boys were just too different to get along. We don’t know.

But the older brother was NOT happy to have the younger brother home again. Instead he pouted. He whined. He was so angry that he did not want to join the party, didn’t want to welcome his little brother home.

It was up to the father to reemphasize the relationship between the boys, telling him, “**Your brother** was lost and is found, was dead and is alive again!”

Jesus does not tell us the end of the story. In fact, the end of the story is up to the scribes and the Pharisees he is talking to. **They are** the older brother, the self-righteous ones who resent the sinners, the ones who have squandered the family fortune in loose living.

They are the ones who think the prodigal should be punished, not celebrated. They are the ones standing outside the door, refusing to go in to the party.

When we hear this story, who do WE identify with? The prodigal, the older brother, maybe the father? At different times, probably, different characters.

But I think that most of us who grew up in the church, who have always followed the rules the best we can, who are good people, not like some people we know---need to see the older brother in ourselves.

We need to see that God rejoices over the return of one sinner to the family of God and not resent the fact that God welcomes them with open arms.

Yes, we know we're sinners, but we're not as bad as other people. We've lived good lives, moral lives, good Christian lives. And that's just the point.

How many of us resent the very idea that some other people, people who have wasted years of their lives having way too much fun, smoking, drinking, partying, and worse----that THOSE people will be at the party that God has when they come to themselves and ask God for forgiveness and love?

Are we standing outside the door and pouting because we have missed all the fun?

Jesus is telling the scribes and Pharisees that they are guilty of the sin of self-righteousness. They don't know how to give grace or even receive it! They don't know how to forgive or love or rejoice over the lost ones who return.

And what about us? Are we too busy being self-righteous to join in the party? Are we more worried about what's fair and how we want God to mete out justice, or actually punishment, than we want to understand the great gift of God's mercy and grace?

We are called to do justice, yes, that's true, but God's justice is NOT punishing people for sins they have repented of and asked forgiveness for! God's justice is actually making sure that everyone has what they need, not giving them what they deserve. And we are also called to love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Who are we to question it when God celebrates the return of one beloved child to the family? Who are we to be hard-hearted against anyone? To critique God in this way is to put ourselves above God, to be guilty of the sin of self-righteousness.

Jesus leaves the story unfinished. One son has returned to God. He was lost and is found. But we don't know what choice the older brother makes. We don't know if he ends up lost or not lost.

Only the older brother can write the end of this story. Only we, because we are who Jesus is talking to, can choose what we will say and do.

Will we welcome our brothers and sisters home when they return to God's house? Or will we stand outside and miss the party?

Will we judge others because of what they have done, or will we be the channels of God's grace to all of those who are weary and want to come home?

God comes out from the party to find us. Will we step away from him or will we let God embrace us with love and grace and mercy? Will we stand outside, or will we welcome all of our brothers and sisters home?

May the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit touch our hearts and souls, bringing us in to God's loving arms. Amen!