

“Lost and Found”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Hear the words from the disciple Luke:

Read Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

O God, your glory is always to have mercy.

Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways,

and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith

to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word,

Jesus Christ your Son,

who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns,

one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Intro:

We have embarked on a “journey of the heart,” walking these Lenten days toward resurrection. Embracing transformation, new possibilities, and new life is what our journey is all about. But we still have work to do before we arrive in the garden with an empty tomb. As Easter begins to appear on the very distant horizon, we might be tempted to quicken our pace. But if we listened to the Apostle Paul in his letter to Corinth, we are reminded that we still need to walk slowly and with great care. Before we can get to the new creation of Easter, we have some repair work to do within our own hearts. So far on our journey, we have travelled through fruitful fields, barren wilderness, countless stars, promises of God both large and small, and tables where all are fed. Like threads that sew together a patchwork quilt, today we begin binding together our

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journey with repentance, reconciliation, and repair. And maybe at the end of our wilderness journey we will arrive at the place we started and know it again for the first time as new creations.

The story we just heard is Christianity in a nutshell. It is what Charles Dickens called “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” There is more ink spilled on this parable of Jesus’ than any of the others. It captures our imagination. We can place ourselves in the story. We no doubt see ourselves at moments as the prodigal son, other moments as the son who stayed on the farm, and at other moments as the father.

The story is so powerful because it is a story of the most important idea in our faith tradition. It is the story of Grace. And the beautiful thing about this story’s communication of Grace is that the grace that is shown and expressed in this story is not just the grace that we see with the Father running out into the road to welcome home his son. It is also the story of grace shown to the other son who we are left with there outside the party. The father not only wants to share forgiveness with his wayward son, but he wants to share the joy of forgiving with his loyal son.

This story illustrates for us perfectly the Wesleyan idea of three-fold Grace, which is a distinctive idea in our faith tradition. You see—our heritage is that we don’t merely celebrate the grace of justification. We worship a God who is bubbling over with Grace. As soon as we are bowled over by this amazing act of forgiveness narrated by Jesus as a father running out into a road to welcome us home, we also can see that this is only one element of the story. There is more grace in this story than that one beautiful image!

John Wesley was interested in breaking the idea of grace from a one time experience of justification or salvation, to instead be understood as a stream of experiences, a whole lifetime of

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salvation. A path of human and divine relationship that led toward humans realizing and manifesting the image of God—what Wesley called utter sanctification, or perfection.

Our scriptures today illustrate three very important aspects of Grace. We believe that humans have fallen into a lost state of Sin. But we are never so far from God that he can't reach us and be found. This is prevenient Grace. We believe that this God grabs hold of us, either in a dramatic change of life, or in a gradual process. This is justifying grace.

We believe that God molds us after the moment of justification. This is sanctifying Grace.

In our story, Jesus tells of a son who misunderstands what his father has to offer. He thinks of his father merely as the source of his inheritance and he doesn't want to wait for the old man to die to get what's coming to him. So, as we heard, his father split the inheritance between the two sons, and the younger son takes off.

Andrew Marr, a Benedictine monk who wrote on this parable, clued me into the fact that “The Greek phrase that in English is translated as: the younger son "squandered his property" is actually much stronger and richer in the original. Literally, the phrase means: he "scattered his substance." That is, the younger son completely lost himself in his immoral living.”

Yes, in an effort to do things “his way” and “be out on his own,” the younger son instead “scatters his substance.” He forgets his identity to the extent that when he is in the pig pen and he envisions going back to his father, he sees himself signing on as one of his father's slaves.

He only sees this potential because he is still motivated by his own needs and wants. What compels him to go back to his father is his own hunger when he looks at the pig slop. He still sees “with a human point of view” as Paul puts it in our first reading. But even though his

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longing for home is tainted with self preservation, we would proclaim that it still contains God’s grace.

Wesley said that prevenient, or preventing grace is responsible for “all the drawings of the Father, the desires after God, which if we yield to them, increase more and more.” And one of the subtle shifts in the story explains exactly how this prevenient grace leads to a deeper understanding of the “new creation” that we become when we return into the Father’s arms!

If we look closely at the text... we see what the son has told himself he is going to say when he gets home. we see what is missing when he actually gets there? His father is overwhelmed with compassion for his son and runs out into the road to meet him when he is still half a mile away, and throws his arms around him. The son stammers out part of his pre-rehearsed speech, but leaves off the part about being hired on as one of the servants. You see, **in his father’s arms, he reclaims his identity as a son.**

That the part of grace that we call “justification.” **It means accepting the forgiveness of a father longing to give it.** In our relationships, we have probably had a positive experience of admitting our guilt. It is a positive experience when we come to terms with our own recklessness with someone’s love and then, because they love us, they forgive us. It is a freeing experience. Admitting means “letting in.” When we admit our sin. When we “let it in” and accept that it is our human condition, we also admit God’s grace that had forgiven this sin. It is being embraced by the arms of a tearful, happy father.

In admitting that sin does not earn us the forgiveness. Notice what happens first: the father runs out and embraces the son, **then** the son confesses. Confession is not a motivation for God’s forgiveness, it is a response to it. This time, the son’s speech is not just inspired by his

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own needs, it's not just another plan as to how he can once again manipulate his father. This time, the son's confession is a response to his father's love.

This is why in our tradition, we mark each individual uncovering justifying grace by responding with a “profession of faith.” Those of us who are full members of this church are called “professing members,” and that profession of faith is that no amount of working on Dad's farm with the servants can earn us what God gives us freely as a gift!

Our profession of faith does not earn the justification we receive. Grace, like God, is three in one. Grace is lavish. It is like a father killing the fatted calf and putting his ring on his sons finger and giving him the best robe. Grace is too magnificent and overwhelming to simply have one understanding. There's not three different kinds of grace, there is **one** Grace that is understood by us in **three** different ways.

T. S. Eliot (one of my favorite 20th cent. Poets) put it like this: "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." The prodigal son, who had been out in the far country “scattering his substance” is now in his father's arms renewed and reclaimed. Upon arriving at that same farm where he had shook the dust off his feet and abandoned his family, he comes there again and feels the unyielding love of his father, and he sees home again for the first time.

And then, the controversial party....If we take a look at Jesus' parables, we might begin to notice that every time he talks about the Kingdom of God, he usually describes it as a party—it is a feast with an open invitation. At the end of our parable today, we see the same thing—a party. And then we see one of our characters, who is actually the main character considering who Jesus is speaking to when he tells this story, (aka the older brother/ The Pharisees) we see him sulking outside the party, whining that his father has been unfair.

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We see him distancing himself from his brother, “this son of yours,” he says. “The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” This doesn’t just apply to the prodigal son, it applies to the older son as well. The older brother is faced with a decision. He chose not to go exploring. He chose not to have parties with his share of the inheritance. Instead he chose to silently stay and fester. How he came to utilize his father’s inheritance evidently came to weigh him down with the burden of resentment.

For all those years, he directed his resentment toward his long lost brother—that selfish, head in the clouds, squanderer. But when the boy returns home and he refuses to go in and join the party, the resentment boils over onto his father as well, doesn’t it! “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.”

So, the older brother too finds himself in a new/old environment. Have you ever had the feeling where you know you can never really leave but you can never really stay either? He is home where he has always been, but now his father has cracked the door open a little bit so he can see his old relationships in a new light. He can view his brother not from a “human point of view” as Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians, but instead as a “new creation!” The power and glory of grace is that if he looks at his brother in the light of his father’s love and acceptance, he will see his father’s abiding love for himself too! He will arrive at the place he started and know it again for the first time.

But then again, our older brother may withdraw from his father and run off into the dark night, listening to the faint echoes of the party from his own private hiding place, sinking deeper and deeper into the hell of resentment.

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Jesus, master storyteller, leaves us hanging. He doesn't give us an ending because the story itself is a call to action. He doesn't just tie up the story in a pretty little bow and say, “And they all lived happily ever after.” Jesus was telling the story to the Pharisees. He probably intended for them to see themselves as the older brother, and he was giving them a choice: stay out here and sulk and turn your nose up at the people I am embracing, or come on in and enjoy the party!

Back to the image of that older brother standing outside the party, scowling and resenting—has to do with why we are going to respond to the sharing of the word this morning by saying the traditional Apostles' creed, with footnote and all! You see, if you turn to page 881 and look through the creed, you come to the line where it says, “was crucified dead and buried” * and that asterisk points you down to the bottom of the page where it says “Traditional use of this creed includes these words: “He descended into hell.”

Resentment can poison a heart. It colors one's whole perspective, and turns a celebration into reason for jealousy. But Grace pursues us, even into the depths of hell, trying to get us to turn around and peek through that cracked door. Part of our most central creed had the notion of Grace pursuing even those in Hell. And because the parable ends with the Father out there on the porch, we are led to the conclusion that God's grace chases us wherever we go—endlessly hopeful in our persuasion.

And this is a key to sanctifying grace. It offers us the framework of saying that Grace is journey. It is a process. It is not a ring put on our finger, it is not something to possess or earn. It is a dynamic, evolving relationship between us and our Heavenly Father.

Grace, even sanctifying grace, isn't compulsive. God will run out and welcome us as we return home, but notice you don't see the Father down there in the far country, grabbing Prodigal

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Son by the ear and fetching him back home. He will come out in the courtyard and persuade and plead with us to come on in to the party, but there must be some element of response. This is why Wesley hated the idea of predestination. Predestination said that God’s grace and salvation was forced into the lives of some and not even offered to others. There was no dynamic relationship to respond to—Grace under predestination was a commodity: you either had it or you didn’t.

But though Grace isn’t forced upon us, it is never withdrawn from us. God persuades and pleads with us to walk in the Light, but we are stubborn. We are “stiff-necked” people, to use an Old Testament description, who are too resentful to have fellowship with our brother.

Sanctification is a reconciling grace. It is “striving toward perfection,” as Wesley said. This striving toward perfection is what Paul called being “ambassadors for Christ.” And that perfection isn’t some kind of Yoda-esqe wisdom or some kind of Super-man invincibility, it is the perfection of Love. It is growing into the inheritance of a Father’s heart which would propel us down a road to welcome someone who has done us wrong or miss the party because we are pleading with the world to reconcile. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” In other words, come on in and enjoy the party!¹

¹ <http://morrisokumc.blogspot.com/2007/03/march-18-sermon-arriving-where-we.html#2492489617316738328>

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Let us pray:

Loving God, you love us like a parent, more than we can ever know. Give us the strength to teach each other, as sister and brother, following the love that Jesus shows to each of us. Oh, God, you've made us in your distinct image, each with unique differences, each which you love and claim for each individual. We pray that you will strengthen us through your Spirit to tolerate our differences and to love one another for who we are, to come together in dialogue, in discussion, in compassion, that we might be one community, in the whole body of Christ. For it is in the name of Jesus Christ who loves us all and brings us together at the table that we pray. Amen.

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Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.²

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>