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“The Strange Case of the Brushed Aside Brother”

Sermon Series: Twice Told Tales: Parables for Skeptics

Scripture Lesson: *Luke 15:11-31*

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Are you lost? Let us pray.

Lord God we are grateful for your grace and we confess that we often try to live outside of it, depending upon our own filthy rags of righteousness. Pour out your Holy Spirit so that we may be transformed and renewed for your glory. Amen.

Last Friday Jen and I drove back from our vacation in northern Michigan. We had precise, written directions about how to return. But somewhere along the way, following those precise directions, we took a wrong turn and got lost on our way back. We drove a long way before we knew we were lost. After all we were on the numbered highway we were supposed to be on, headed in the direction in which we were supposed to head. But somewhere, after a long time, in the back roads of Indiana, we began to suspect that we were not exactly where we needed to be. Being lost is never a good thing, but being lost and not knowing it, is a disaster.

The well-known Presbyterian preacher Bruce Larson points out that here in *Matthew 15* we have four parables about being lost.¹ We have a parable of the lost sheep, where Christ points out that if a shepherd has 99 sheep and he loses one, he will leave the 99 and go find the one. Jesus followed that up with a story about a woman who turned her house and bothered all her friends and neighbors trying to find one lost coin. After that we have what may be the most famous story in the world, the story of the Prodigal Son who was lost to his Father, figured out that he was lost, and then returned home.

The appendix to that story is a little less famous. It is the story of the elder brother who was lost and didn't know it. Although he never left home, he was lost in his heart because he was trying to earn his father's love through works. Being lost is never a good thing. But being lost and not knowing it is a disaster. No one is so lost as someone who does not know what gives their life value and meaning. Today that is the question which we are trying to answer, “What makes our life meaningful?”

I have told some of you that when I was in seminary, I worked for two years at a Christian school in the inner city of Trenton, NJ. The Father's Heart Urban Prep School was its name. It was a school for kids who had been thrown out of the public schools. These were kids who did not know at least one of their parents, and in some cases both, who had been told by society their life had no meaning. We had a beautiful young girl at the school named Rosa. When Rosa turned 14 she decided she wanted to have a baby. We all know of course that this kind of thing happens to teenagers by accident. But trying to have a baby, unmarried at 14 years old, really left us scratching our heads. When we talked to Rosa she said, “If I have baby then I will have someone who will always love me.” For Rosa, having a baby gave her life value and meaning. But I am not sure we are so different. We sometimes do desperate things, giving our body, mind and spirit over to the sinful powers of the world. We turn over our body, mind and spirit to the sinful powers of the world for so long, that one morning we wake up and we don't recognize ourselves, and we wonder how we got to where we are. We are lost.

How can we know if we are lost? Jen and I first began to suspect that we were really lost when we drove through a little town in Indiana and outside the town was a strange sign that said, “Home of Dan Patch.” Who is Dan Patch you ask? I had to look him up on Wikipedia. Dan Patch is a world champion harness racing horse born in 1896. They made a movie about him in 1949 starring Dennis O’Keefe and Gail Russell. Who knew? Not me. We know we are lost when there are strange signs in our life, signs which we cannot explain or reconcile with Jesus Christ’s unconditional love for us.

The older brother showed a few signs that he was lost and didn’t know it. *Luke 15:27* tells us that when the older brother learned that his wayward younger brother had come home, he did not go in to the party. Instead he was so angry that he stood outside and made his father leave the party and come outside to talk with him. He did not rejoice in repentance. One of the signs that we are lost is that we do not have a passion to see people repent from their sinful lives and come to know Jesus Christ. If we are lost in our good works, as was the older brother, we are indifferent to seeing people experience the grace of Jesus Christ. We may even find ourselves angry or threatened to share a pew with a sinner or even a stranger in Church.

I have a friend who tells the story of visiting a large Presbyterian church with his family—his wife, son and daughter. They arrived at worship a few minutes early and sat down in an empty pew and began looking over the bulletin and the sanctuary. In a few minutes a man tapped him on the shoulder and said, “This is our pew.” My friend wasn’t even sure what the man was talking about, but the man went on to explain that his family sat in this pew every Sunday and had done for so years and that my friend’s family would simply have to find someplace else to sit.

The very verse before this parable tells us exactly what our attitude should be when it comes to seeing people turn their lives over to Jesus Christ—*Luke 15:10*: “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Gregory of Nazianzus is known as one of the Fathers of the Church. Teaching and preaching in the fourth century, Gregory is one of the greatest theologians the Church has had. At the age of 23 he was ordained and appointed to be the priest of a small church. The night before he was supposed to give his first sermon, he ran away trying to find himself. He returned again about a year later, right before Easter, and amazingly enough was welcomed back by at least some of the congregation. In his Easter sermon he preached, “Brethren, let us forgive all offenses for the Resurrection’s sake.”² Now, if I take off, unannounced for a year, I had better have more than a good Easter sermon to make up for it. In my experience most Christians are either resurrection Christians or they are crucifixion Christians. They are either interested in the new life which we all have in Jesus Christ or they are interested in dwelling upon the sin which Christ sent hurtling into oblivion upon the cross. The older brother was definitely a crucifixion Christian. We should all be resurrection Christians. If that were not the case, then Good Friday would be the greatest day of the Christian year, rather than Easter.

This morning I want you to engage in a little exercise with me. I would like for you to think of a person who hurt you—who said or did something which denigrated you somehow, or even just made you feel bad. It could be recent. It could be from a long time ago. You are standing in worship this morning, singing a hymn. And to your surprise this person walks up next to you, tells you “I’m sorry,” and asks if they could hold the hymnal with you and sing to God this morning. What do you do? Your answer may tell if you can rejoice in repentance or if you are lost and don’t know it.

Another sign that the older brother was lost was his absence of appreciation. *Luke 15:29* quotes him saying to the father, “*Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.*”

The author Stephen Covey tells a story about going to see a movie with his then two young sons, Sean and Stephen, aged four and six. During the movie the

younger Sean fell asleep and Covey, the father, took his coat and wrapped it around him because it was cold, and carried him to the car. When Covey tucked his older son, Stephen, into bed, he noticed he was crying. “Daddy, if I were cold, would you wrap your coat around me too?”³

One of the commandments which doesn’t get as much press as some of the others—certainly not as much as adultery or murder—is the tenth. “*Thou shalt not covet anything which is your neighbors.*” It is written deep into our sour, sinful, human nature to want what other people have, to look at what we think our neighbor owns and want it for ourselves. But if the elder son had only stopped to consider his father’s great love and grace, he would have seen that he did not have to earn his blessings and that everything over which his father was sovereign belonged to him. *Luke 15:31: “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”*

Harry Truman had a prayer he wrote which he prayed every day of his life since high school. It went, “O, Almighty and Everlasting God, Creator of heaven and earth and the universe: Help me to be, to think, to act what is right, because it is right: Make me truthful, honest, and honorable in all things: Make me intellectually honest for the sake of right and honor and without thought of reward to me. Give me the ability to be charitable, forgiving, and patient with my fellow men—Help me to understand their motives and their shortcomings—even as thou understandeth mine: Amen.”⁴ I don’t know about you, but I do not want political leaders who are lost and don’t know it. I want leaders who understand that their ascent to high office is not something they have earned because of their superior intelligence, charisma, or money; who understand that it is only at the grace and pleasure of Almighty God that they serve the people. Unless we realize that who we are, all we have ever had, all we possess, and all we will ever be comes from God, and we are grateful for it—we are lost and don’t know it.

The older son trashed the child his father treasured. Let me conduct a little preaching experiment this morning. I would like everyone here to think for a second. What was the prodigal son’s sin? What did

he do? How did he waste his father’s money? Most people assume he spent it on women. Yet as Jesus tells His story, He doesn’t even mention women. Jesus simply says that he spent his money recklessly. Do you know what reckless spending is? When I worked as a part-time youth minister, I almost bought a jet ski because my car had a tow kit and there was a lake within a 90-minute drive. Reckless spending is me buying dinner for 10 people at a nice restaurant because my student loan check came in that afternoon. There are plenty of ways to spend recklessly and Jesus says nothing about women.

So where do we get the idea that the prodigal son spent his money on women? We get it from the older brother who is happy to trash his younger brother whom his father treasures. *Luke 15:30: “But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”*

Another sign which tells us we are lost is that we trash those whom God treasures. My Dad tells the story about going with my Mom to get ice cream to a parlor across the street when they were first married. My Dad noticed that every time a certain older woman scooped his ice cream that he never got a full scoop. She was just not strong enough anymore to dig the ice cream scooper all the way in. So my Dad decided he would say something to the manager about it. My Dad explained the problem to him and finished by saying “I think that old lady is hurting your business.” “That’s my Mother,” the manager said.

How painful do you think it was for the father to hear his older son trash his younger brother? Yet this is something which we do in the Church somewhat routinely. Some of the worst things I have ever heard someone say about someone else have been children of God talking about other children of God. I am so thankful that Christ died to save me from the sins I have committed in talking about other people.

Along these same lines, *Luke 12:3* teaches us: “*Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.*” We should choose our words very

carefully when we speak about other people, because those words will usually find the light of day. And when we speak falsely about someone else, or even just unfairly, we not only damage their reputation, we damage ours as well. We also demonstrate that we are lost because we choose to trash what God treasures.

You have to wonder how long the older son had been trying to earn the love of His Father. How long had he been lost trying to give his life meaning and purpose through the works which He did for His father? How long had he sought to discover himself through laboring to build himself up, rather than simply resting in his father's love? What is it that makes our existence consequential? What is it that gives life meaning? It is not our labors. It is the Father's love which gives our life meaning. Our labors fade into the shadows as the sun sets over earth. God's steadfast love endures forever.

This parable ends without a resolution. It ends with the father simply stating his love for both of his lost sons. One son, the son who knew he was lost, has been found. We don't know the fate of the other lost son, the son who didn't know he was lost. We do know one thing. If he is ever to be found, he must first come to terms with being lost.

Where are you this morning? Did you see a sign telling you that you are lost? I've got good news for you. Jesus Christ said that His mission was to come to seek and save the lost. And I can promise you that this morning He is seeking you. He has sought you since before time began. Since before He hung the sun in the sky to light the day and the moon in the heaven to illumine the night. Since before you spoke

your first word, cried your first tear, took your first breath, He sought you. And He seeks you this morning. No matter how lost, no matter how far from home—Jesus Christ is calling you, earnestly, tenderly. “Come home.”

If you are lost and would like to come home, “Please pray with me this morning...”

¹ Bruce Larson, *The Communicators Commentary: Luke*, ed. Lloyd Ogilvie (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1983) p. 230.

² John A. McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001) p. 107.

³ Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) p. 193.

⁴ Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006) p. 221.