



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy: Lost and Found Luke 15:11-32; II Corinthians 5:16-21

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf,

because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”
Luke 15:11-32

“Lost and found.” Those familiar and famous words are lodged in our memories, not necessarily because of the wording of Luke’s Gospel, but likely because of John Newton’s hymn “Amazing Grace” which our choir will sing a bit later. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Newton had seen wretchedness firsthand as a mate and then as captain of slave ships. I suspect that the people who were chained in the bowels of those slave ships, living in their own refuse, hardly nourished by what was passed off as food, stripped of every freedom imaginable—except their faith—would have happily traded places with the Prodigal Son who at least had pods to eat and fresh air to breath and a choice to find his life again. It would be close to two hundred years before their descendants ever felt like they were found and alive again!

It is amusing that we have taken this same phrase and applied it to all of the personal objects we misplace. As you know, we have a bin where we place all items that have been lost and then found by someone other than the owner. We collected quite an assortment of things through the years: jackets, sweaters, scarves, and gloves. We have harbored hats, jewelry, umbrellas, and sunglasses. We also keep car keys and house keys. I understand how you can forget a coat or glasses or umbrella and leave church without it, but how do you even leave the church parking lot without your car keys? And how do you get back into your house without your house keys? Yet, we have kept a few sets of keys here for years!

The things in our lost and found bin were once important items to someone but obviously the owners stopped searching in each case. Last week, I was balancing our check book and realized I did not have a deposit slip that I had carefully placed in an envelope. I looked through my briefcase,

my car, the recycling and the trash—several times. I did not have to have the slip, but I am meticulous about keeping financial records so I looked and kept looking. When I left the house on Friday, because it was cold, I slipped on a warm, woolen jacket that I have not had to wear too often this winter. As I hung it up once I reached the office, I noticed a white envelope peeking out of the interior pocket. Sure enough, there was my deposit slip. As the old adage goes, you will find whatever you are missing in the last place that you look.

The story of the Prodigal Son is also known as the parable of the Lost Son and is preceded by two other parables: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. Both of these stories describe how the owner of a lost object goes to extraordinary lengths to find what he or she lost. The shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to go look for one lamb that has gone missing. Who does that? Who puts an entire flock of sheep in a vulnerable position to go and look for one animal that might well be already dead? The woman who lost a coin turns her house upside down to find it. I get that. I will go over and over my check book to reconcile a discrepancy of three cents and will utter a sigh of relief when I find it! But when this lady found her lost coin, she called in the neighbors and had a party! Who does that?

In the parable we just read, the son actually lost himself. Jesus tells us so because he says that after the young man hit bottom, he “came to himself.” It is a different story altogether because no one went looking for him. He lost himself and he found himself. The father kept an eye on the road to see if he would come home. The older brother never looked at all.

This parable is obviously not about the older brother’s goodness and faithfulness. Those things are givens. It is about his lack of concern for his lost brother and his lack of joy upon his brother’s arrival. It is a jab at the scribes and Pharisees, older brothers, so to speak, to the sinners whom Jesus was finding all over the place. The religious leaders played by the rules and did not like it one bit when a younger sibling jumped line and got ahead of them in getting God’s favor.

When I think about the scribes and Pharisees, I think about how I react when I’m driving on a highway and a lane up ahead is closed. I will usually slip into the open lane well ahead of the merge so that I don’t get stuck in a blocked lane. Not everyone does that, however. Doesn’t it infuriate you when other cars blow right by you as you creep along in the now slow lane? And when you get to the point at which the two lanes merge into one, they try to nuzzle in ahead of you. Now, if the sun is shining, I’m not in a hurry, and

“Amazing Grace” is playing on the radio, I will slow down even more and allow the inconsiderate brother in the other lane to slip in ahead of me. But most days are not like that! On a cloudy day when I am in a hurry and “You Don’t Mess around with Jim” is playing, I will speed up as I get to the merge and practically touch the bumper of the car in front of me, daring that selfish driver to the left to trying to wedge in between us. You know you do it too!

That is the scribe and Pharisee in us! That is the older brother in us. We don’t want anyone to get ahead of us, especially when we have been waiting patiently in line like we are supposed to do. That is why the parable of the workers in the vineyard irritates us so much. I don’t care if I did agree to work all day for a certain wage that is fair. When someone else shows up and works one hour and gets paid the same wage, I am going to make some noise. That is what the older brother did in the parable of the Lost Son.

If the older brother would stop fussing and blowing his horn and giving all those hand signals that tell other drivers what to do, if he would quietly lean into his father to hear what he has to say, he might hear a different story. Through all of the father’s crying and laughing and hyperventilating, the older brother would hear the words he has craved for many years: “Son, you know I love you. I depend on you. You never let me down. I can rely on you. Everything I have is yours. But this brother of yours, this irresponsible, immoral, wasted excuse for a human being is my son, too. He was lost to me. I never stopped looking for him to return, but he was lost. He was as good as dead, though I never stopped hoping that he was alive. He has been found! He is alive! I never left you to go look for him. I never searched high and low for him. But he is found and he is alive! I have to celebrate!”

It was not a new story for the Jews who heard Jesus tell the parable. Some of them likely remembered Cain and Abel, the first sibling rivals. So jealous was Cain of his brother that he killed him, which is what a lot of older brothers want to do to their younger brothers—I know mine did at times! That was sibling rivalry at its worst. Others would have thought of Esau and Jacob, where the heel-sneak of a younger brother deceived his father and defrauded his older twin of the blessing which guaranteed inheritance and favor. In that story, however, many years later, a repentant Jacob returned home to find Esau, ready, not to break him limb by limb, but to welcome with open arms the brother he had lost so long ago.

Jesus told this trio of stories going from the quaint tale about a lost sheep to the bizarre story about a lost coin to the absurd story of the lost son. Why? Why give favor to someone who put the rest of the family through a

hellish experience with nothing to show for it? Why celebrate the return of someone who, frankly, made life a lot easier when he left? Why rejoice at the return of someone who causes such pain?

Lean in, Jesus says. Lean in and listen and look. Obviously Jesus told this story to illustrate God's amazing grace toward us. Not only does God stay on the lookout for us when we walk away from his love and care, but when we return, God runs down the driveway to welcome us home. It is a parable about irrepressible love and joy when we come to ourselves and return to our true home in Christ.

Yet, there is more to notice here. Lean in. Lean in and see a young person eager to explore the world and all of the delights it offers but who has not a clue as to how to go about it. See a young person who desperately needs boundaries to keep him safe.

Whether we tested our wings long ago or are just now eager to explore the world, we all need to know we are safe in that exploration. That is why boundaries are important. Every person wants to know how far he or she can push the limits and still be safe, but we are not often a good judge of our boundaries. Parents in particular and the community in general have the responsibility of establishing the boundaries which will keep us safe and still allow us to experience life in its fullness. Granted those boundaries change constantly, but everyone of us needs to know we are safe up to a certain point. Lean in and see a young man who needed a safe boundary but found none. And lean in enough to recognize the pain in his face as he realizes what he has done to the people he loves the most.

Lean in and listen to a father who wanted to please his children, who wanted them to do things he never could, to see the world in ways he never had the opportunity to do. Perhaps the father wanted to be liked as much as the son wanted to get away. Perhaps the father had always struggled with how to deal with this son who always banged up against the boundaries he set and finally grew weary from it all. There are some people who absolutely have to live life on their own terms regardless of the consequences. Listen for the frustration, the worry, the prayers begging God to take care of this wandering soul of a son. Few of us have escaped sleepless nights worrying about our children and the choices they make.

In a book he wrote several years ago, Ohio Governor John Kasich tells about the birth of his twin daughters. They weighed only four pounds when he and his wife Karen took them home. Shortly thereafter, he had to return

to Congress where he served at the time as a Representative from Ohio. He worried about them and his wife who had to care for these newborns alone. He noted that every couple of hours in those days before cell phones, he rushed to a bank of phones in the House cloak room to check on his family. One day, his good friend Tom Coburn, who was a Representative from Oklahoma and an obstetrician who had dealt with a lot of anxious fathers, said to him, “Kasich, stop worrying about your kids. They’re God’s children, not yours.”¹ His words gave the new father a lot to think about. It may not diminish our worry much, but the reality is that all of us are God’s children now. As you lean into this story, realize that this Father feels lost because both of his sons have slipped from his hands, one to decadence, the other to neglect. We understand this father’s story.

Lean in again and hear the muttered complaints of the older son who has chosen to be the good child and stay home to help run the family business. All he wants is to have a good life and please his father, to make up for the vagabond life his brother has chosen, and to be rewarded for his loyalty. Notice the pain on his face each time he sees his father looking wistfully down the road. Understand the hurt he feels when his brother’s return is celebrated while his own steadfastness is never acknowledged. Feel the anger that comes from being underappreciated no matter what you do. Lean in and see that he, too, has tracks from the tears he cried worrying over his little brother and wishing he could leave all this hard work behind and go see the world.

The holiness in this story is palpable, but not because everything wraps up nice and neat at the end. We don’t know how the story plays out the day after the party. This story is rich with holiness because we can find ourselves all over it . . . and we discover that God is right in the middle of it. When we lean into this story, we learn a lot about ourselves and God. We find that God is rushing toward each one of us whether we are the lost son, the lost older brother, or the lost parent. God waits and looks and wraps us in his grace when we come home.

Lean into this story and realize that you are looking in a mirror—not dimly, but face to face. Find yourself in whatever way you have been lost and come home again. Lean into the holiness of this story, hear God’s glad welcome, and feel the embrace of his amazing grace wrap you in comfort and love. Welcome home!

¹John Kasich with Daniel Paisner, *Every Other Monday: Twenty Years of Life, Lunch, Faith, and Friendship* (New York: Atria Books, 2010), 9.

March 6, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How we long to be made new, O God! How we wish we could wake up one morning stronger, healthier, taller, shorter, leaner, smarter, prettier, richer, kinder, tougher, wiser, or holier. We wish that in Christ you would make us all that we want to be. Instead, you remind us that we are made in your image and are wonderful as we are. All we need do is live up to the qualities you have instilled within us and live with the spirit you have created for us.

So free us from the cocoons of our small opinions, our narrow dreams, our shallow hopes, and our binding sins. Enable us to spread the wings of our faith which, when warmed in the light of your love, can carry us to the places in need of the gifts we have been given. Regenerate our hearts, we pray, so that everything we do will vibrate with the life you have given us. Open our eyes to see the seeds of beauty in all things. Open our ears to hear the rhythms of your love pulsing all around us. Open our arms to embrace the life you have given us with all of the wonder and gratitude that it deserves.

As what is old passes by us, help us to cope with illness and disease. Grant us the medical care we need for the infirmities that are ours. Bring to us the treatments that will enhance the quality of our lives and even bring us health once again. As we let die the attitudes and actions that have caused grief to others, make us new in mind and spirit. Grant us the strength to make difficult decisions and the resolve to change our lives for the better. Heal the broken hearts around us, we pray, and grant forgiveness where repentance has opened the door.

Sing for us, O God, a hymn of new creation and let the melody of your grace play out in our lives. Sing through us, O God, and fill the world with your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.