

“Who Is Lost?”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

In Luke 15, what motivated Jesus to teach with three parables in a row – the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son? Who was listening to these parables who thought of themselves as lost? Who was listening to these parables who did not think of themselves as lost? Who was really lost? Who is really lost today?

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Who is lost?

A kid with his hand out is demanding, not asking, that he get his share of inheritance right now, up front. As parents, we know that a kid with his hand out is not unusual. But in this case it’s shocking because of first century culture. Jewish law dictated that when the father passed away, the eldest son would get two-thirds of the estate (a double portion) and the next youngest son one-third.

But, as Jesus tells it, Dad was still alive and well. So the younger son is being a real self-centered jerk when he says, “Dad, I wish you were already dead. Forget the family business and, for that matter, the whole family. I’m outta here.”

Although it wasn’t unusual for a father to distribute property in advance as in the case of marriage, Jesus strongly implies that the younger son’s demand is disrespectful, rebellious, and foolish – a clear violation of the command to honor one’s parents.

In a culture where family and community always took priority over the individual, the kid's self-centered demand would have raised the eyebrows of those hearing the parable. The Pharisees and scribes would definitely lump the son in with the tax collectors and sinners they were accusing Jesus of befriending.

Just to make sure he's hammering home his point, Jesus describes the suddenly wealthy kid living it up in some foreign, Gentile country. There he "squanders" all the money by living a wild and undisciplined lifestyle. And after he's blown it all and is flat broke, he hires himself out to a Gentile pig farmer, which is about as un-Jewish as he can get. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, pigs are an abomination to Jews and pig farmers were cursed.

The picture of a young man, Jewish or not, being sent to the fields to feed the pigs and who is so hungry that he would have "gladly filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating," is the picture of a failure, Jesus is making the point to his listeners that this kid is even farther gone than any of the "sinners" with whom he's sitting down to dinner, that upset them so much.

Remember this whole parable is in response to the "Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So this extreme sinner who is feeding the pigs finally "came to himself" and decided to go home. Notice, though, that at least initially it's more of a pragmatic decision than a penitential one.

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!” He figures that if he apologizes, maybe at least his father will take him back as a hired hand. At least he’ll have a full belly.

Of course, we know the next picture – that of the father racing down the driveway to embrace his long-lost sinner son and calling for a major league party to be thrown in his honor. The now penitential son kneels at the feet of his father, while the father’s face reflects a deep love and sense of relief. It is a picture portrayed in Rembrandt’s beautiful painting entitled, “The Return of the Prodigal Son” that Christians have looked to for centuries as a reminder of God’s love and forgiveness.

But in Jesus’ first century, his hearers were hearing a story about the failure of the father who is really more the focus of the parable than the prodigal son for whom the parable is named after.

The Pharisees and scribes would certainly have stamped “fail” on the father’s willingness to give the boy his inheritance in the first place. A good father would have squashed such rebellion in a child rather than give into it. And then, after the greedy boy has the nerve to actually show his face back on the family farm, the father disgraces himself by “running” out to meet him “while he was still far off.” In first century Israel, it was considered the height of indignity for a man, especially a family patriarch, to run anywhere for anything, let alone to run out from the house to meet the one who had dishonored him. Not only that, but the father actually forgives the boy and restores him to the status of son – not hired hand – even though the kid had disowned himself from the family. Where was the discipline? Where was the lesson? Where was the justice in all that? Dad was a failure, here, for sure.

The older son thinks so, too. He can't believe Dad is doing such a crazy thing for his stupid kid brother. He stands outside the party, angry, so the father once again disgraces himself to come out and "plead with him."

The older son gives Dad a tongue-lashing, reminding Dad that he's been a loyal son the whole time but he has nothing to show for it. Of course he conveniently forgot about his two-thirds of the inheritance, which Dad points out in verse 31. The big brother wants justice, wants retribution, wants what's coming to him, but all Dad says is, "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."

When we read Jesus' parables, we see that he has a habit of turning failures into the heroes of his stories. Samaritans are perceived as unfaithful until one becomes a Good Samaritan by helping a beat-up man along the roadside. The dishonest manager was squandering his boss's property until he becomes a hero by collecting what he can from his master's debtors.

There are many other examples of Jesus picking losers like tax collectors to be his disciples and partied with people who everyone in polite and pious society would have considered to be failures on a whole lot of levels. Jesus didn't seem to mind being pictured as a failure because he knew that was the only way that other people who were pictured as failures would come to him.

The parable of the loving father and his two sons was designed to invite self-righteous

Pharisees and scribes of then and now to see how they had become the older brother, failing to experience the joy and celebration that God does when wayward sinners come home.

But the parable was also told to remind all of us who have wandered away from our Father at different points in our lives, that God will go to great lengths in the person of Jesus and in the presence of the Holy Spirit to bring us home. No matter how lost we were, no matter how lost we are, the Father always welcomes us home as his children.

Lent reminds us that the story of Jesus inevitably moves toward the cross, the ultimate picture of failure and disgrace. Jesus was willing to risk the embarrassment of being stripped, beaten, and hanged naked to die and to be held up as a failure for the whole world to see on that Friday. It is through failure that God chooses to save the world. It is through being lost, that our Father bring us home.

As Paul would later write in 1 Corinthians 1:23-25 . . . ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

I finish with a story from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota where I used to go for continuing education during my nine years of serving in North Dakota.

A little more than 25 years ago, a youth walking by the old log Muskego Chapel on the Luther Seminary campus in St. Paul, Minnesota, peeped in its window and noticed a beautiful chalice sitting on the altar.

He broke into the chapel and stole it. Naturally, the young boy didn't know that this chalice had been a gift to Luther Seminary in 1936 from Norway's King Olaf. In October 2006, Pastor Glenn Berg-Moberg from St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church, a neighbor of the seminary, called Luther President Rick Bliese, asking for a meeting to discuss "an interesting matter." The boy who had stolen the chalice, now a grown man, had visited his congregation. He was dying of cancer and had one request: He wanted to return the stolen chalice to the seminary. He had kept the pewter chalice in perfect condition. It had sat on his mantel for 25 years. Finally, its presence had become a source of discomfort and disease. Before the man died, he wanted it returned to its rightful owner and place, Luther Seminary and Old Muskego Chapel.

President Bliese received the gift of "the prodigal chalice" with surprise and delight. Letters were written to this dying man expressing appreciation, as well as forgiveness for his deed. The lost had been found; now the blind were gaining their sight. The man received the letters with gratitude and died soon afterward.

Now this chalice has become doubly special because it was returned after serving the purpose for which it was really intended: calling sinners to repentance and forgiveness. It has become a powerful sign of Luther Seminary's mission.

May the peace of God . . .

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