

The Lost and Found
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
March 31, 2019 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Last week we discussed a bit about parables as we examined Jesus' parable of the fig tree. This week we have another very common parable, "The Prodigal Son." You may remember that I stated last week that parables are rich in meaning. They are not simple, and they generally can be interpreted in more than one way. The classic definition of a parable states that parables "leave the mind in sufficient doubt about [their] precise application to tease it into active thought." (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*) I like that. Indeed, I have often stated that one of the reasons I love Biblical Studies is that I can read a section of the Bible that I've studied dozens of times before and still find something new, something that will "tease my mind into active thought." And so, as we consider the parable of the prodigal son, I ask again, where in the parable are you?

Like last week's parable, this parable has a commonly accepted interpretation. God is the father, and we sinners. . . We are the wayward son, who if we come to the father seeking forgiveness will always be welcomed home. Of course, this interpretation is totally valid. We are all, to one degree or another "sinners." Yes, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, states: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) I remember being an undergraduate music student many years ago, when a close friend of mine stated, "Mark, I have one big problem with Christianity." I asked, "What's that?" He said, "I just can't believe that I'm so all-fired sinful."

I replied, "I don't think you're so all-fired sinful. You are a kind, loving, caring person. But none of us is perfect. There are certainly times when you've had an evil thought about someone, or coveted some possession or even the life another had. There are certainly times when you've looked at the life of another musician and thought, I wish I had their job or I wish I made their money. That's only human. But the Good News of Christianity is that God is a merciful and a loving God. God understands our humanness, and God forgives our shortcomings. (As an aside, I need to tell you that sadly, there are United Methodists that would claim that my friend is so "all-fired sinful" because my friend is gay. I don't believe that. I believe that God created all people in God's loving image – gay people and straight people; and, as the saying goes: "God doesn't make junk.")

But back to the Prodigal Son - Yes, to one degree or another, we are all sinners, we are all prodigals. I also resist ranking sins. I resist claiming that some sins are worse than others. Is the man who embezzled a million dollars a worse sinner than the man who shoplifted a ten dollar item? Is the man who shoplifted a video game a worse sinner than the man who shoplifted a can of tuna fish to feed his starving family? Is the man who shoplifted that can of tuna fish a sinner at all? There are those who will state that they are generally against capital punishment, but will state that some person's crime was so heinous that they deserve to die. Well, I think that's for God to decide not me. I recently saw a church sign that said: "Just love them. I'll sort the rest out later. – God" So, indeed, we have all, to some degree or another, been the prodigal son; and the best news in the world is that we can always, always return to the loving arms of the Father.

But what about the other son, the one that stayed home to work the farm with his father? How often have we been there? Did you notice that the dedicated son won't even refer to his brother as "my brother?" He says to the father, "*This son of yours* returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, and you threw a feast for him." How often have all of us, myself included, expressed our resentment regarding those whom we have labeled "sinners." How often have all of us, myself included, shouted "unfair." Well, my friends, if the parable of the prodigal son teaches us anything, it teaches us that love doesn't work that way. Love is not about fairness. Love extends far beyond fairness.

How often have I stated that being a Christian is "hard work." Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. (It was a scripture from a few weeks back.) Now, the father does give the older son assurance: "Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." But, you know, the interesting thing? The parable ends with the father's statement: "This brother of yours was dead and had come to life; he was lost and has been found." It ends with good news for the father and the prodigal son; but it never really says what happened to the other brother. I like to think that the father's plea was convincing; that the other son also welcomed his brother back into the family. But we all know that often it doesn't work that way. Often the other brother continues to harbor resentment, continues to hold a grudge, continues the ill thoughts against his brother. And, as human as that may be, that's also sinful. Thus, in some ways the other brother becomes the prodigal. And the saddest thing about all of that is: all

the resentment, all the ill thinking, all the grief hurts the one who resents more than the other. The evil eats away at one's very soul.

I mentioned last week the book *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson. Williamson states that God is the source of all love; and love is the energy that fuels the universe. If we allow hate to displace love, we lose the energy; we lose our fuel; and in a very real way, our souls die.

And finally, there is the father, the one whose love never dies. Of course, given that eternal love, I like to cast the almighty and all-loving God as the father. And still, I suspect that there are times when we have all been in that role – watching, waiting, hoping for the return of the prodigal; watching, waiting, hoping for the reestablishment of a relationship. To those who may currently still be watching and waiting and hoping, I remind you to draw on the energy, the source of all love. In the waiting, we can literally lose that energy. The waiting can sap our strength. It can eat at us; it can in and of itself become a source of ill. Remember the other son – friends, spouses, loved ones. Share the joy. Share the love of God with them. But we all know that the love for the prodigal never ends; and we would not want it any other way.

As I wrote this sermon and as I reflected on the parable of the prodigal son; I could not help but think of our denomination – the United Methodist Church, the church that I love, the church that I have dedicated the last 15 years of my life to. We are currently as deeply divided as the two sons in the story. The only question is who is the prodigal and who is the stay-at-home son. And, of course, the answer depends on whom you ask.

Our conservative brothers and sisters, led by a group called the Wesleyan Covenant Association, would claim that we are the prodigals. If we would only interpret scripture “the right way,” repent, and come home to the father, everything would be okay.

Then our more progressive congregations, which this church and this pastor fully support, say that those other folks are the prodigal “sinners.” After all, they refuse to accept all of God's people as full members of Christ's church in the spirit of Christian Love.

And I do my best to follow the example of the loving father. I don't agree with the Wesleyan Covenant Association, and I've been quite open about that. But I also respect their view and I struggle to love them. And so, I continue to pledge to you to work to make the United Methodist Church a church for all people, and

all means all – black and white, young and old, gay and straight. Secondly, I will work to keep the United Methodist Church a single united church – one church celebrating our wonderful, God-given diversity. But hear, the “secondarily” in that statement. I will not keep the church united at the expense of my LGBTQIA friends. Finally, I note that United Methodist ministers are ordained for life. I will be retiring from active ministry in a few months. That will not terminate my call to work for full-inclusion. If anything, it will give me more time and more freedom to answer that call.

But hear my earlier statement. Above all else, I believe in the Good News of the amazing love of God. I pray that the love of God will so fill each and every one of us, that we might truly radiate that love to every person we meet. This has always been my prayer; and it will always be my prayer.

Let us pray. . .

Holy God,

Whether we have stayed at home,
or strayed from the fold,
we know that your love is with us.

And so we ask that we might truly experience you love,
warming us, holding us, and filling us to overflowing,
so we might radiate your love to all people, at all times, and in all places,
for indeed you are God of all people.

This we pray in your holy name.

Amen.

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