

Sunday September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Luke 15:1-32

“What Does it Mean to be Lost?”

A police car pulled up in front of grandma Bessie's house, and grandpa got out. The polite policeman explained that the elderly gentleman said that he was lost in the park and couldn't find his way home. "Morris," said grandma, "You've been going to that park for over 30 years! How come you get lost today?" Leaning close to grandma, so that the policeman couldn't hear, grandpa whispered, "I wasn't lost. I was just too tired to walk home."

How do you know when you are lost? In a geographical sense we all understand, I think, what being lost is all about. You make a turn somewhere, and suddenly you don't know where you are. For men this was particularly challenging, given our reluctance to ask for directions. With modern GPS systems, getting lost is not as probable, but sometimes the GPS can be wrong. Never use your GPS to go to a Cemetery! Its not nice to hear "You have reached your destination"

With or without a GPS system I think a great number of people, world wide, are lost; some very lost. Geographically, they might know where they are. Maybe they have never traveled very far from home, so everything looks familiar, but they can still be lost. Our passage today is about being lost, and perhaps in terms of the prodigal son, getting lost. Most of the time, preachers will divide these parables into two sermons. The first will deal with the lost sheep and the lost coin; and the second sermon will be on the prodigal son.

I understand the reason for this division, but this time I want to take the three as a group. Luke, after all, records Jesus telling these parables in sequence. The three parables have the same subject matter, and all three were prompted by something that happens in verse 2. There we read this; “And the Pharisees, and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” That’s the motivation behind the parables.

Jesus was, as he often was, being criticized for the approach he took to people who were not up to the standards of purity the Pharisees and scribes though we should aspire to. The Pharisees might very well agree that those Jesus reached out to were lost. Maybe even they would conclude they were “lost causes”. Perhaps they looked down on these “sinners” because it made them feel superior, godlier.

Please note that never, does Jesus dispute that these outcasts from society that he dines with are not lost. Jesus himself sees these folks as in a state of lostness. The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is that when encountering a lost person, Jesus seeks to recover them into the fold, while the Pharisees see them as hopeless; a write off from society. These three parables are Jesus’ way of shining some light on the cold heartedness and neglect of those who should know better to win back people to the fulness of God.

Instead of arguing with the Pharisees and scribes Jesus uses his tried-and-true method, of parables to show the true nature of his ministry and what should be the ministry of those who claim allegiance to God. “Who among you?” Who among you would take action to find a lamb that had wandered off from the flock?

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Who among you would not be frantic to find a silver coin that somehow went missing. Would you not light a lamp, sweep the floor and make a thorough search. All of us know what it is like to lose something that causes us tremendous anxiety. So much so that we undertake a frantic search to recover the lost item. And don't even get me started on the whole subject of a lost child. No parent would lose their child and say, "It is what it is" and walk away.

God sees these so-called sinners, as valuable souls who are lost. They are worthy to be sought out, at any cost or effort. This foreshadows the ultimate effort to find all of us who were lost, when God gave his son to redeem us. The lost are loved, wanted and worthy because God deems them so. The Pharisees opinion, or our opinion is irrelevant. And if God should deem someone worthy of his love and effort to win into the family, who are we to disagree.

Bringing home, the lost is so important to God that when even one lost soul is found, there is great celebrating in heaven. Should not we, who are in the fold already, not join in the celebration? Well clearly, the Pharisees seem determined to decline, to celebrate the inclusion of those who were lost. They wanted to dig in their heels, and grumble and conclude they have been robbed of their special status before God.

Therefore, Jesus offers his third parable. A familiar one to say the least. The Prodigal son. What exactly, does being a prodigal mean? Well, it is defined as "spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant". Perhaps you know the story. The younger son greatly insults his father by demanding his share of his father's estate. Jesus' audience would have been outraged by such a request.

The younger son, whose share would be smaller, was saying in effect that he wished his father dead. The father being alive was a dampener on the younger son spreading his wings. Surprisingly, the father does as he asks, and the son travels to a far-off land, where he squanders his money in dissolute living. Meaning, an immoral lifestyle. I will leave the details of that to your imagination.

A famine hits the land, just as the younger son runs out of money. He resorts to feeding pigs, but he is still hungry and without resources. He comes to his senses and realizes that his father's servants at least, have enough to eat.

One of the most beautiful stories of the Scriptures is that of the prodigal son, the youth who left home, got into deep difficulty, wasted his life in riotous living, and ended up in the pigpen. Dr. J. Vernon McGee once asked, "Do you know the difference between the son in that pigpen and the pig? The difference is that no pig has ever said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father." He is right; only sons say that. That is why there will be no condemnation, no rejection by God of his children. All believers, even prodigal sons, are his children, not his enemies.

So, he sets off home, rehearsing a speech to win favour from his father. One insight I stumbled on made the point that in Jesus' day there were three types of servants. One was the day labourers who were paid for their work for the day and then went home. The second group were servants that served the master, were paid but had their own home which they went to each evening.

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The final group were indentured servants who lived on the estate and worked long days. They were essentially or even could be; slaves. The word used for the servitude by the son in preparing to make peace with his father is the first one. The kind like an employee with no tie to the master or estate. It seems that even at his worst moments he was still negotiating for his position.

The story continues and the father is pictured as waiting and watching for his son to return. When he sees him at a distance, he hikes up his robes and runs to greet him. It is quite a picture for Jesus' audience. This elder, dignified man, running like a school boy, with robes flapping and sandals slapping at his feet. The father reaches his son and falls upon him with kisses and weeping. The father is simply overjoyed.

The younger son barely gets his speech started when the father calls for a robe, sandals for his feet and a ring for his finger to signify he is a son. Servants are ordered to prepare the fatted calf, and a huge celebration is under way. Why? "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" I think we can assume that the father never expected to see his son again. For all intents and purposes, he was dead to the father.

Now into the scene enters the elder brother, who had been toiling away in the fields working. He would be tired and likely very hungry after a hard day. He approaches the house and hears the celebration. He scratches his head. There were no parties scheduled. I certainly was not invited. He stops a servant and asks, "what's going on?" "What did I miss?" Upon learning why there is a celebration going on, what does he do? He sulks.

He refuses to go in and greet his lost brother. He refuses to celebrate this homecoming in any way. The father comes out to invite him to come and join in the celebration but he refuses. Then out of his mouth the elder brother spews his bitterness. He is angry that his special status is to be shared. The elder brother might have thought his brother dead as well. He probably saw his father pining over the loss of the younger son, but he would have wanted him to stay dead.

He complains bitterly that he has toiled for all these years, and never disobeyed a command of his father. This is clearly a shot at the Pharisees and scribes. And despite this, the father had not even given him a young goat to have a party with his friends. Yet when this younger son of your (notice he refuses to call him brother), has devoured your property on loose living, you kill the fatted calf. Why shouldn't I be bitter?

The father tries to console him by reminding him of the reality that everything he has is his, but he had to celebrate because his brother "was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found". We are not told how the Pharisees reacted to these parables but I think we can make a good guess. They knew who the parables were directed at, and they were livid. They thought they were the only ones, worthy of the Father's attention and resources.

The elder brothers are alive and well in our world and in the church. Those who shun the lost and refuse to celebrate when one is found. They refuse to allow the lost brother or sister a seat at the table. They complain about the lack of deference to them because they have been inside the fold since "Noah ran the ark onto Ararat."

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If, as I am arguing, parables are revelations of the way the Kingdom of God works, then these three parables speak to God's overwhelming desire to seek the lost, and to welcome the lost home. Jesus says it differently elsewhere; "I came to heal the sick". The Kingdom of God lavishly pours itself out to reach the lost, in whatever lostness they find themselves.

That being said, clearly these parables are reminding us that if we really love God and want his Kingdom to come on earth, then we need to join in the search for the lost and celebrate with heaven when a lost one is found. We have to jettison this idea, once and for all, that we are entitled to God's grace, or that we think we have earned it some how. Like the older son who griped that he had "worked like a slave" for his father for years.

These three parables are a beautiful presentation about how God loves us and seeks us out and that despite the grumpy older brothers and sister who criticize the lavishness of God's grace, God is going to party over every single one that finds their way home. It does not matter whether we like it or not, it simply is the way it is and God's way is always the definitive way. Always, every day, and for eternity.

But I return us to the one question still niggling away in my mind. What exactly does it mean to be "lost". Some times its easy to see, like when someone is really down and out, but what about us? I know we might claim we are saved by Christ, but I still think we still get lost from time to time. And from time-to-time, God seeks us out to bring us back home. I came across something very amusing. It is a list of things that might identify us as Canadians.

A sample of this signs are that you might be a Canadian. You say it's FRESH when it's -20 degrees out, because that's not cold yet. Or you think it's warm when it's 25 degrees. The cashier at Tim Horton's knows your order before you do. That the correct spelling of colour is with a U. You say sorry if someone bumps into you. Then apologize for saying it. You can name at least 10 Canadian bands just to prove we have some.

The only thing better than maple and bacon is maple bacon. You can hum the Hockey Night in Canada anthem. Towns name streets after hockey players instead of actors. You have a large collection of Canadian Tire cash sitting in your junk drawer. Well, what if there were probable signs that you are lost and in need of finding. So, I tried to compile a little list of some signs that might indicate you are lost spiritually.

If you cannot remember the last time you prayed or read your bible; you might be lost. If your relationship with your spouse, kids, friends, coworkers, etc. is very rocky; you might be lost. If other things are taking your focus away from worship; you might be lost. If you find it easy to look down on someone else or easily judge them; you might be lost.

If you are relying on someone else to make you happy; you might be lost. If you look to substances legal or otherwise, to help you cope with your inner emotional pain; you might be lost. If you find yourself being overwhelmed by life; (guilty!) you might be lost. If you are constantly trying to impress or please another person; you might be lost. If you live in debilitating fear over anything; you might be lost.

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If you cannot live for anyone other than yourself; you might be lost. Are you so angry at someone or even God that you lash out, plot revenge or avoid them; you might be lost. If you do not think that God has anything to say about how you conduct your life, even a small part of it; you might be lost. The point here is that all of us from time to time get a little lost. We talk ourselves into thinking some awful things about our circumstances.

In our lostness we can be like the prodigal son think we are outside of the Father's love. Like the elder brother, we can become bitter that we are not richer, more popular, or more influential because of our faith, or our loyalty to the Father. Maybe what we all need is a spiritual GPS. We have them in our cars or on our smart phones. I don't have one, but probably should, given my mistakes finding places.

With a GPS in a car, what happens when you miss your turn, or deliberately pass by the suggested route. Well on most units, a voice comes on and says "recalculating". Meaning the device will find an alternative route. Maybe if your conscience is poking you, it is the Holy Spirit's way of telling you are lost and God is seeking you out. Like the lost sheep, lost coin and prodigal son, we all need from time to time to be found and brought back again into the fulness of God presence.

Are you feeling lost today? At the end of your rope? Without resources or any more strength, then consider yourself found, and cherished, by a merciful and loving God.