

SERMON
+ Lent 4 C
March 30, 2025

For most of us,
this is a very familiar parable
we call the Prodigal Son,
although the way it's told,
it's really a parable of a man who had two sons.

But it's actually the third of three parables
that Jesus tells one after the other
about the same thing:
Someone goes to unreasonable lengths
to search for and find the lost,
and in joy throws a big celebration.

The first one we skipped over
is a parable about a shepherd who has a hundred sheep
but discovers that one is lost.
So he leaves the ninety-nine
to go look for the one that's lost.

And when he finds it,
he throws a party in celebration,
because the one sheep that was lost
was that important to him.

In the second parable we skipped over,
a woman with ten coins
discovers that one is lost.
So, she tears her house upside-down
looking for that one coin.

And when she finds it,
she throws a party to celebrate
because that coin
is that important to her.

This parable of the father who had two sons

is the third parable of the series
that describes how the lost is found,
and the finder throws a party to celebrate.

Here, the father looks for his lost younger son.
Surely, they must have assumed he was dead and gone.
But we know he was looking for him
because he saw him coming from a long way off,
and ran out to greet him
before his son even got close to the gate.

And when the lost son is found,
the father is filled with joy
and throws a party to celebrate –
just like the shepherd and the woman
when they found their lost sheep and coin –
because this son, who was lost and dead to him,
is that important to him.

Jesus tells us what these parables are about
when he tells the first two parables:
there is joy in heaven in the presence of the angels of God,
over one sinner who repents.
The lost are found, and heaven throws a party.

That's the way it is with God,
and the fundamental way of Jesus and the church:
receiving and welcoming lost ones –
those who are outsiders,
those who have hit bottom and come to themselves,
those who have had a younger-son kind of experience
that even the insiders might not be comfortable with.

The parable is great good news to the lost.
You who have ever hit bottom know this good news:
God receives and welcomes,
provides for and rejoices over the lost who are found.
Finding the lost is so important
that when they are found, heaven celebrates.

But then there's that second part of our parable –
the part that doesn't appear to fit
the format of the series, “lost, looking, found, party.”
It's the part about the older son.

He's like the ninety-nine sheep
the shepherd leaves behind,
and the nine coins the woman leaves on the table
to sweep the house.

They weren't really part of those other parables.
They just stood quietly by
and waited for the lost one to be found.
Though it helps to remember that
those ninety-nine sheep and those nine coins
always continued to belong to the shepherd and the woman.

But here, that elder son takes an active part in the plot.
This elder son presents a whole new perspective
in these parables of lost, found, party.

He thinks according to the world's ways
that counts and tallies,
and assumes fairness matters,
and you don't get anything for free
so you have to work for it and earn it,
like an obedient slave, if necessary.
And those who mess up need to pay the price.

We are that way, too, of course.
We get judgmental or resistant or self-righteous
because we think that
in celebrating the finding of one who was lost
we, who were never lost, somehow lose out.
That somehow God has limited mercy,
so that raising up one
must mean the others are demoted.

Or, that those who were lost
are somehow inferior to those of us

who, by our responsibility and duty,
our obligations and our obedient slaving,
have earned what God gives them by grace.
And they don't deserve it, but we do.

And that's where it's really important to remember
how this whole series of parables began.

"...The tax collectors and sinners –
those lost younger-son types of questionable reputation –
were coming near [to Jesus] to listen to him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes –
the insiders of the faith and elder-son types –
were grumbling and saying,

'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable."

He told them these three parables.

He told them how when what is lost is found,
there is joy in heaven.

Jesus is out looking for the lost to find them,
and when he finds them,
he welcomes them and eats with them –
celebrates with them in a meal.

That's why he eats with tax collectors and sinners.
And he still does to this day.

But he adds that part about the older son
for the grumbling Pharisees and scribes
because he knows how the Pharisees and scribes – how we all –
sometimes don't get that.

Or worse, we do get it, and we resent it.

Jesus knows us.
And he wants us to know
how to receive those whom he welcomes
with mercy, grace, and joy
so we can do it the way God does it.

He wants us to remember our baptismal identity,
and remember that

we are already members of the household,
but it's not because we deserve it.

In fact we do not deserve it
any more than those lost ones Jesus has found.
But by God's mercy and grace,
we are baptized into God's family anyway.

Jesus wants us to know
that all that God has mercifully given to them,
God has also mercifully given to us. Already.
We already live in the abundance of God's grace
as a son or daughter with an inheritance,
not as a slave.

And that as long as we stand outside the party
in self-righteous indignation
or judgmental jealousy or resentment,
we are just as lost to the Father
as the younger son ever was.
Yet, in both cases, the Father loves us.
The Father still claims us as child and not slave.
The Father still wraps loving arms around us
and receives us and honors us as beloved.

Luke will go on to tell about how,
when Jesus finishes telling this parable
he continues on his way –
the way that leads to Jerusalem
and the cross of crucifixion.
He goes there for the younger sons of the world
whom he has found,
and for the older sons, too.
He gives himself for both – for all of us.
For you.
Finding us who are lost is that important to him.

What he wants is for us
to love our brothers and sisters
no matter where they've been or what they've done

because he has found them and loves them,
and to rejoice that they, like us, are found.
And to come into the party,
where he invites us to eat with him,
and where we can join with him
as full members of the family,
welcoming the lost who were dead,
but now are alive.