

Finder of Lost People

Luke 15:11-32

READ Luke 15:11-32

When we looked at the first 10 verses of this chapter last week, we noted the headings printed over the major sections of the chapter in the Bible: “The Lost Sheep”, “The Lost Coin”, and “The Lost Son”. We talked a little bit about the differences among these stories, with the main difference that the lost sheep and the lost coin did nothing on their own to help themselves be found. They just got lost and stayed lost until the seeker did whatever was necessary to find them. Then there was a party, organized by the finder. Then we come to “The Lost Son”, who does come to his senses – or I think the better interpretation is that he finally listened to the voice of God that had been in his ear all along, even before he determined to head out on his own. There’s that prevenient grace thing again – God’s grace working on our behalf before we are even aware of the concept of grace to make it possible for us to hear God’s voice. The lost son hears that voice, returns to the source, and the seeker throws a party.

Do you see a pattern here? Whether the lost is one out of two or one out of ten or one out of 100, God knows when one is missing. What about one out of a billion? Listen to Isaiah 40:26: “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.” If you have ever wondered if you really matter to God, listen to that again: “...not one of them is missing.” Not one star, not one coin, not one sheep, not one person. You matter to God. It makes no difference how many people you matter to... you matter to God. You are important to God – important to Him because you are one of His. God made you, and He made you for relationship with Him. When you are lost, when you wander off, when you drift away, when you run away, when you make a wrong turn... God misses you and He wants you back. He will search and He will wait, and God will not be satisfied until you return. God made us for wholeness and for oneness with Him, and He will not rest until we are

there – one with Him. Then there is the party. I love that pattern. God misses us, seeks us, finds us, brings us home, and then God throws a party. Is that not great?

I said my Bible titles this parable “The Parable of the Lost Son”. In another Bible it says “The Parable of the Lost Son and His Brother”. We are going to talk about the brother in a minute. We always think of this as the parable of the Prodigal Son, but I didn’t see the word “prodigal” in there, so I looked it up. Here’s what the dictionary says: **1. extravagantly wasteful** - spendthrift or extravagant to a degree bordering on recklessness; **2. producing generous amounts** - giving or producing something in large amounts; **3. wasting parental money** - spending parental money wastefully, but returning home to a warm welcome. That last one makes a point about the common familiarity with this story – I didn’t get that out of a Bible dictionary. The definitions of “prodigal” fit with what our lost son in this story did while he was lost – off in the distant country – so I guess that’s where we get the title. Either way, we get the point, and we get the label that helps us remember the story.

We have multiple opportunities to put ourselves into this story. We may be able to relate to the younger son, or to the older son, or the father, or maybe the servants, or maybe the people invited to the party.

Are we in the place of the younger son? Do you get the implication of what he says to his father at the beginning? When he says “I want my inheritance now”, he is effectively saying, “I wish you were dead.” Had you thought of it that way before? He is saying “I’m really not all that interested in what you can do for me later. I’m not all that interested in listening to you or working with you or being here at all. Let’s just get this over with, and give me my cut now.” Then he goes away and blows it all in wild living. We can use our imaginations here. I doubt that you’ve imagined him spending it all at church bake sales. At his low point, all his new-found friends have moved on to someone else with money, and he recognizes himself as lost.

By my definition, he wasn’t really lost. My definition of lost is that you don’t have the ability to find your way back to someplace familiar. As bleak as things were for this young man, he remembered how to get home. There is a great example of grace –

prevenient grace – working in us and for us before we even recognize it. Because God loves us and because God offers us relationship with Himself all the time, no matter where we are, when we make the decision to turn to God or return to God, the way there is clear. The constant presence of the Holy Spirit in us will guide back home.

The distinction of this parable among the lost stuff in Luke 15 is that the lost son did finally hear his Father's voice and turn toward home. That action of the son introduces a unique element into these parables of lost stuff: trust. It took more than hearing the Father's voice in his head; he had to trust the relationship that he had with the Father, trust that when he returned, he would return to the Father who loved him. He had to imagine that place and that time. He had to imagine God in his future. His faith in that relationship overcame his fear of the future. Seeing God, and knowing that the God who loved us once loves us still and will love us then... seeing that vision of God in our future enables us to overcome fear and turn, and re-turn.

The law and custom of the day was pretty harsh on people who had behaved like this younger son. The family and even the neighbors would have been within their legal rights to stone this young man to death when he returned. He had so dishonored his father that he could have been considered as good as dead himself. But he came back anyway, and his father ran out to meet him. The young man must have run through that scene in his mind a thousand times on the journey home. And if he trusted the Father who loved him once to love him still, this is just how he would have envisioned it. Can you see here that if anyone had begun to throw stones at this young man, who the stones would have hit first? His father didn't just welcome him home, he sheltered him as he came. The party that followed would have surely had the neighbors complaining about the noise, at least until they got invited.

The servants must have thought the old man had finally gone 'round the bend. Wasn't this the same brat that took the money and left? The older brother started there, and then got mad. But what the father told the older brother and showed by his example to the servants and all the friends and family was that no matter what we do, no matter how far we wander or how far we run, we still have our place with the father. That's

what Jesus wanted us to know and appreciate about the fundamental, unchangeable character of God's love for us, each individual one of us, through this parable.

We have to see God as the father in this story, and as the shepherd in the parable of the lost sheep and the woman in the parable of the lost coin. There was not another sheep that could take the place of the lost one, or another coin that could substitute for the lost one, or another son who could take the place of the one who had gone away. There was a hole there, an empty chair that could not be filled by anyone else.

That is how it is with God when we are not one with him. He knows who is missing, just as he has numbered all the stars. We are all accounted for, even when we are not present. But God is watching for us to make that turn for home. He is waiting to embrace us and wrap us up in the best robe and throw a party. He is always calling to us, always making His love for us known, even when we are not paying attention. Then when we hear Him, when we realize that we are not home, that we are not where we should be, we will know how to get there – how to get to the heart of God. We trust that God loves us; we imagine God loving us all the way into His heart. God made us for that, and He will not rest until we are there.

Are you there, or are you in the distant country? Are you on your way away from God, or on your way home? Wherever you are, this is the story for you... the story of God's never-ending longing for you and for me to be perfectly one with Him. Won't you come home? A party is waiting. Imagine yourself in it.

Amen.