

Luke 15, Lost sons parable, 2019

Today we have a very familiar and beloved story from the Gospel of Luke that is essentially a family story, of a father and his son, two brothers. We just returned from a wonderful vacation in Florida, during which time we were a part of our nephew, Erik's, wedding on a beach on Anna Maria Island. It was truly a joyous occasion, and it was a happy gathering of Phil's side of our family. Erik is the son of Phil's sister, Laurie, one of their four children, all of whom happen to be sons. Erik is the 3rd of their boys, and he's always been an easy going guy, able to get along with anyone and everyone—not unlike many middle children, I suppose. He's quite different from his super-competitive oldest brother, Jonathan; or the gentle, introspective next brother by age, Matthew; or the youngest of the 4, Josh, who is all about sports and high energy. In fact, if there are four types of sons, Laurie and her husband got one of each of the types! These are four very different young men, even though they shared the same parents and upbringing. And they have by no means always gotten along with each other easily and well. Yet at this wedding, they were most definitely reveling in their familial relationship and enjoying reminiscing about their shared past, which brings to mind a simple truth about siblings: siblings uniquely understand each other's history, even as they may have experienced that shared history differently. They can be each other's worst enemy and/or best friend, but they share a unique bond through having grown up with the same parents in the same household, even if they are very different people.

That would be true of the siblings we encounter in our Gospel text this morning. This parable is traditionally referred to as “The Prodigal Son”, but many scholars suggest

we should re-title it in our minds. There are *three* characters in this parable not just one; and there are *two* sons, not just the prodigal. This morning I'm thinking about this as the parable of The Two Lost Sons, because I think that is, in fact, the story Jesus presents. A story about a father and two sons; two brothers, who like many siblings, are very different from one another, and yet share parents and history. I say "parents", although only *one* parent is mentioned in this parable, the father. We have in this story what appears to be a single-parent family, in modern speak. No mention is made of a mother; perhaps she has died. For whatever reason, we hear only of this one parent, this father, who has apparently been raising his two sons alone. Each son has a distinctive personality, as often happens. Each sibling has a particular way of being lost. Let's see which of the two we might relate to the most easily. Or maybe we can easily relate to both.

The older son sounds like a typical 1st born child—responsible, dutiful, and exemplary in his behavior. Unfortunately, he also seems to have some of the unattractive flip sides of those virtues—self-righteousness, self-pity, a sense of unappreciated martyrdom. It appears that although this older son stays home with his father and tends to the family farm, he does not do so *gladly*. He does not appear to find pleasure in his work or in his father's presence. He apparently experienced his life as a burden. Perhaps he felt that life was passing him by, and he may secretly have envied his renegade younger brother, even as he was angered by how his younger brother was hurting their father. His fury consumes him—he can see only his brother's sins and none of his own. Does he sound at all familiar to you? Here are this way in which I find myself relating to

this brother---he's a score keeper. He keeps track. He's probably kept records of all the hours he's put into the family farm, all the ways he's helped out dear old dad, all the times he hasn't gone out to party with his friends. Likewise, he has a big goose egg in his little brother's column when it comes to helping and a repulsively large number in the column that records his brother's misdeeds. He's a score keeper. And so am I. I keep track of things I shouldn't; I count and compare and contrast with others in ways that are far from gracious or helpful. Many of us, regardless of our birth order, can tend to be older sons in our behavior and attitudes. We do our duty and then some, but we may resentfully wonder why the world doesn't seem to appreciate and reward us more. We are the world's workers, but sometimes our work becomes a joyless burden and we inflict our misery on those around us or turn it inward as resentment and bitterness. Particularly if we compare ourselves to others and deem them less worthy or more unfairly rewarded. That's certainly one way any of us can get lost. Might this be you?

The younger son, in contrast, sounds like a stereotypical spoiled youngest child. He sounds impulsive, irresponsible and self-centered. In asking his father for his share of the family fortune, he is treating his father as if he were already dead. In running off to squander that fortune, he leaves his father to a life of perpetual anxiety for his safety. The young son seems to have embraced instant gratification to an extreme. He wanted what he wanted, when he wanted it, which was right now. Our culture also promotes instant gratification, and many of us may be drawn to that way of life. Now, perhaps the younger son also had some of the virtues that can be the flip side of those flaws. We don't hear about that. But, you know, people like that often do have many charming and

endearing qualities. Maybe he was spontaneous, fun to be with, humorous. Evidently his father loved him deeply and there may have been good reason for that. Some of us here today may also be younger sons, prone to think mostly of our wants, tending to live for instant gratification and sometimes hurting others without realizing it in the pursuit of our pleasures. I certainly relate to the notion of loving my comforts and loving them right now, of prioritizing my needs above all others and finding a way to rationalize it. That's another way we can get lost. Might *this* be you?

Note that these brothers are not only lost to their father in these ways; they are lost *to each other*. So much so that when the younger brother returns, the older brother is too resentful to rejoice. He can't get that chip off of his shoulder. His father pleads with him and reminds him of his kinship to this prodigal brother: he says, "your brother, who was lost, is found". *Your brother*. He reminds this older son of this, because when we're lost, our relationships get broken—between child and parent, between siblings, between all kinds of people. The younger son appeared to have no qualms about abandoning his older brother to take care of farm and father; now the older son cannot find it in his heart to welcome him back. Both are lost.

And notice also that, like many siblings, they *do* share some things in common; not only do they share this father in common, they share a *lack of appreciation* for their father in common. And this is another way to get lost and another place where I find my story intersecting with theirs. Because how often do we fail to appreciate the love we receive from others, especially others like our parents, or like God, whom we may take for granted and just *expect* to love us? The younger son has so little appreciation that he

abandons his father; the older son also has so little appreciation that he resents his efforts on his father's behalf. *Neither* of them has a genuine gratitude for their father's bounty. An unattractive shared quality between these two siblings. And another way in which we may find ourselves getting lost.

When we hear this parable we feel for the Father, don't we? Although only one son runs off, both his sons are lost. One is lost to his irresponsibility; the other to self-righteous anger, but both are lost. Both need to be found. Most of us who have been parents have times when we feel a child of ours is lost in one way or another. There are few kinds of fear and pain that compare to that which a parent feels over their child. And so we may doubly pity this Father in our parable, dealing with two lost and ungrateful sons. Both are lost in sin, neither yet found.

What do parents do when a child runs away? They keep vigil. They look. They wait. They hope and pray. This father in our parable is no exception. We know that he is keeping vigil because of how the story next unfolds. It seems that the younger son's extravagant and careless lifestyle have caught up with him. He loses all his money. The friends he hung out with don't care for him anymore without his money. He's alone, hungry and miserable. He must hire himself out to do a lowly job, especially for a Jewish man---he is feeding pigs. Jews considered pigs unclean animals. But, this son is so reduced in circumstances that even eating pig feed would seem like a step up. This is when he has what we might call a spiritual awakening or a conversion experience or a turning point of one kind or another. Our text tell us, "He came to himself". Somehow, the hardships he is enduring cause him to grow up. He has the realization that he has

sinned against his father and God and he must seek forgiveness. He is willing to be a hired hand to his father, rather than to the ungenerous pig farmer. So he sets off for home. On his way he rehearses what he will say to his father, a meeting he must obviously be dreading. One thing we cannot necessarily determine from this parable is whether or not this younger son is genuinely repentant and sorry or merely making a pretense of apology in order to be assured of a place to sleep and three square meals a day again. Some scholars assume he is genuine; others suspect he is not. But that actually doesn't matter when it comes to the Father's reaction.

Let's switch our focus from these siblings to their father. We know he hasn't given up hope of his younger son's return. We know this because our text reads, "while the younger son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." If he sees the son from far off, he's clearly watching for him. We don't know how much time has passed. Months? Maybe even years? But the father is waiting and watching. And you might have noticed that even before the son gets to give his rehearsed speech of repentance and apology, the Father has welcomed him back with literally open arms. Whether the son apologizes or not; whether he is sincere or not; it doesn't matter to the Father in this moment. He's just glad his lost son is found again; glad to have him home where he belongs. He sets about celebrating the return of this younger son.

As we know, the parable doesn't end there. Which is why this not simply the parable of the prodigal son. If it was, it would already be over, but it's not. The older brother now shows up, lost in his resentment, and obviously seeing this returned prodigal

enjoying his father's forgiveness is like holding a match to a stick of dynamite. He can't believe that the younger son is seemingly rewarded for his bad behavior just because he returns, while he, the dutiful one, has slogged along at home the whole time with no big parties. I think we understand he feels. He's a joyless score keeper, like some of us. But, he's *still* lost. He's not really home yet, even though he never left. His Father tries to explain to him that he loves him just as much as the younger son, and that all he has is the older sons to enjoy. The father urges him to join in celebrating, because as a family, they just need to celebrate the finding of the lost and the return to home of the wayward son and brother.

Like the master storyteller he is, Jesus leaves the parable open-ended. While the younger son has returned and been found, we don't know about the older son. We don't know if the older son is found or if he remains lost. We don't know if he finds it in his heart to forgive his brother and join in the party. And there's more we don't know! We don't know if the younger son is truly repentant and will change his ways, or if he will go right back to his old ways once he has a chance to regroup. We don't know if these two siblings will find a way to be brothers to one another, a way to forgive and befriend each other. We don't know if either of them will truly become more appreciative of their Father's unconditional love. Lots of things we don't know, and Jesus knows exactly what he's doing here. He's leaving us to form our own conclusions and ask our own questions.

What we do know, is that God is the Father in this parable who looks for and welcomes the return of the lost, however they have gotten lost. What may remain a question in our minds and hearts as we move through this Lenten season is this: am I

lost? *How* am I lost? Do I *want* to be found? Have I found my way home to my Father?
Do I see my Father waiting to embrace me and rejoice? And if so, can I find it in my
heart to forgive the wayward ones in my life? Because we're all lost, just in different
ways. We're all just trying to find our way back home. And God looks to welcome us all.
Amen.