

Found and Lost

In the name of him in whom we are loved by the heavenly Father, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel, The Parable of the Prodigal Son, is unquestionably one of the most powerful and moving stories that our Lord Jesus ever told. Quite apart from its spiritual message, it has all the elements of a good short story: there's conflict, tragedy, suspense, a couple of unexpected twists in the plot, a partial resolution, and finally a hanging question that leaves the hearer wondering "What would I do if it were me?" And all this in just twenty or so Bible verses.

But the true beauty of the story is its vivid illustration of spiritual realities. Every sinner who has ever come to repentance recognizes that the prodigal son is *me*. We all know that I am the one who takes the inheritance from the Father and squanders it away in fruitless and unwholesome living. I'm the one who reaps the bitter harvest of what I've sown. And I'm the one who daily comes crawling back to the Father to beg for mercy. And here our Heavenly Father is portrayed as a man who aches for the return of his lost child, who spends much of the day watching the horizon in the hope that today just might be the day that he'll come back, and who even at a great distance recognizes his son even though he's barely a shadow of his former self: starved, unkempt, and dressed in filthy rags. This is a Father who leaps to his feet in joy and runs to meet his wayward son, even while shouting orders to roll out the red carpet and prepare a feast of celebration; a Father who receives his lost son with an embrace and a kiss and orders him to be clothed in glory; a Father who, having been once burned, still risks giving his recently returned son the family signet ring that carries with it the authority of a part owner of the estate.

And this is the picture our Heavenly Father wants us to have in mind every time we go to him to confess our sins. All too often when we gather here for worship, and begin our service with the confession of sin, we think of it as merely another liturgical formality. That isn't the way God sees it. He wants you to know that he yearns for your repentant return so that he can embrace you with his grace and forgiveness. He longs for you to see that the world can only give you a hog-slop of indigestible pods, but that you are always welcome to come and put your feet under his table where you can feast on his generous gifts of mercy in Christ. He wants you to celebrate with him and with angels in heaven that you who were dead in sin have been made alive with Christ, that you who were lost have been found.

But this morning, as touching as it is, I don't want to dwell on the story of the prodigal son. Today, I want to direct your attention to the story of the *Lost* son. "Well, isn't the prodigal son the one who was lost?" Yes, and "was lost" is the key phrase there. At the end of the story the younger son has been found and restored, but the older brother is standing outside complaining bitterly about his father's way of handling family affairs. He's making spiteful accusations against his brother. The result is that even though he's never left home, because of lack of love and his unforgiving attitude he is just as lost as his brother ever was.

It is this older brother that the parable is really about. Jesus directed this story to the Pharisees and Scribes who were complaining about the way he welcomed sinners. And if you'll take a look at the back of your bulletin, you'll see that today's Gospel reading skips verses four through ten of this chapter of Luke. The portion that's missing contains two short parables: that of the lost sheep and the lost coin. That's the shepherd who left the ninety-nine in the field to find the one that was lost, and the woman who misplaced one of her ten coins and turned the

house upside down to find it. In both these stories, the people find what they are looking for and throw a little party for their friends to celebrate the recovery of what they had lost. It turns out that the value of the lost item in both of the parables is about fifteen days' wages; and a half month's pay is nothing to sneeze at. The shepherd would have had that much docked from his wages if he didn't find the sheep, and the woman would have lost that much from what was probably her life savings. So we can understand their joy at recovering what had been lost. And Jesus ends the stories by saying something to this effect: "Do you think that's something to celebrate? I tell you that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents."

Now, the Scribes and Pharisees have listened to these two stories, and they understand how good it would be to find a lost sheep or a lost coin. And that's when Jesus lays on them the story of the prodigal son, which is about the repentant return of a sinful human who is worth infinitely more than any coin or lamb. The young man's father is beside himself with joy, and he's pulling out all the stops to celebrate. And according to Jesus, this party is a mere shadow of the corresponding celebration among the angels of heaven over one sinner who comes to repentance. So while heaven and earth rejoice, the older brother, like the Scribes and Pharisees, stands on the outside, crosses his arms, and looks on with anger and disgust sneering: "*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" And Jesus tells these parables to say, "You bet I do, and so should you."

And for those of us who have been faithful, hard working Christians all our lives, or at least since coming to faith, sometimes that just doesn't seem right. With the older brother, we would feel deeply offended if all the attention were to go to some habitually inactive member who suddenly found himself with a spiritual need and came back to the church to fill it. Though we might not give voice our thoughts, our natural reaction would be to think, "Hey, where was this guy when we needed people to help with this? Or to pitch in for that? Who do you think has been keeping this place going all these years? It sure wasn't him. Who's been teaching Sunday School, or organizing the fund raisers, or serving on the council? Who's been paying the bills? Me, that's who. But as soon as he needs something he comes slithering back expecting everything to be here for him – even though he never lifted a finger to support it. And you watch: as soon as he gets what he needs, make sure you're not standing near the door because he'll knock you down on his way out."

Sound vaguely familiar? Have you ever felt that way? Sadly, that's not the end of it. Because the attitude doesn't extend only to members who have strayed; but also to some people who have never been members of the church at all. You know who I mean. It's those people in our community whose conduct and lifestyle are below our standards, or who have other problems "*That we just don't need in this church. They're not our kind of people*". But then, we assure ourselves, "*They really wouldn't feel comfortable here anyway*" Of course, the question is: "Would they not feel comfortable because their Father wouldn't welcome them, or is it because **we** wouldn't?" How much of the older brother is in each of us? And how many of our younger brothers and sisters stay away because of us? Something the people who heard Jesus tell this story would have understood was a social custom of the day that would have made it the older brother's responsibility to be the acting host of any celebration in his father's house. He would have done most of the "leg work" to ensure that guests were being taken care of, while his father would have had more of an honorary role. And yet in the story, anger and hostility prevent the older brother from fulfilling what was expected of him.

And what we really need to ask is, "Where does this hostile attitude the older brother have come from? What's its source?" Well, first there's envy. At some level the older brother

wishes that he too could have run off and wasted a fortune indulging in every fleshly pleasure. The daily routine of being hard working, upright, and responsible lacks excitement. His little brother seems to be getting away with what he dare not do – but deep in his heart he'd like to. So, too, each of us has an inner desire to run off from our Father and live on the "wild side". Of course, it's easy to forget the misery that the younger brother found at the end of that road. Instead of being envious of those who gamble with their eternal welfare and follow their weak flesh into temptation, we should be grateful that we have been spared the humiliation and misery of starving among the swine.

Another cause of the older brother's hostility is his own attitude about his work at the family's estate. When the younger son comes to his senses, he thinks about going back to work as one of his father's hired hands. He sees the benefits that flow even to the servants of his father's house. But the older brother describes his service for his father as abject slavery. Every day he is well fed, surrounded by friends and family, and has all the comforts and blessings of a safe and secure home; but these he takes for granted. All he can see is hard labor and drudgery. And how often do we see our Christian life in the same way? Filled with God's blessings, we nevertheless think, "All I do is work, work, work, and I never get anything out of it".

And then there's just plain old pride. The older brother attributes his hard work and loyalty to his superior character. Never mind that in his heart he too dreams of running off for a season, and he thinks about his work as an unrelenting burden imposed by a cruel taskmaster. He thinks it is his own good sense and impeccable integrity that keep on the farm. And while we like to think the same thing, we know it's a lie - because every Christian knows in his heart that he is also the *prodigal* son. All that we have is due to the Father's goodness, not because of anything in us. As Paul writes to the church at Corinth: "*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him*". No, we have nothing to boast about, and no reason for pride.

But that doesn't stop us from standing outside the party, fuming with anger born of pride and envy, and wanting to deny our brothers the very mercy we take for granted for ourselves. And so today our Father comes out to plead with us. And it's interesting that he doesn't confront us with a reality check. He doesn't accuse us of the sins we are committing against him and our younger brother. Instead, he invites us in with the same heart of forgiveness that he has for the prodigal son. And he asks us to be what his love has made us, and conform our way of thinking to his. "My child," the Father says, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. You live every day in the blood bought mercy of Christ, and the peace of mind that comes from it. But now look and see what I see: your own brother, lost, helpless, dead in sin, and headed for Hell ... and now he's back safe and alive in Christ. It is for this sort of victory that Christ died. We have to celebrate and be glad."

May God, whose Word of mercy and truth is even now conforming us to be like him, put to death in us the evil attitude of the older brother. May the Lord, by his Spirit, give us his own heart of longing to see the lost come to repentance. May he help us to see our work for the kingdom of God not as a thankless burden, but rather as a privilege that allows us to share in the mission of finding the lost and bringing the dead to life. And sharing in this mission, may

the Lord also allow us to share in the joy of the angels of heaven over each and every sinner who comes to repentance. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!