

Sermon – March 27, 2022
Pastor Dan Hollis
Luke 15:11-32

We just heard the story that's come to be known as the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." *Prodigal* meaning someone who is wastefully or recklessly extravagant. "The prodigal son returns!" My dad would mock me with that one whenever I came home from college, which is odd when you think about it because Dad had *wanted* me out of the house in the first place.

Now, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father had *another* child. A son who was responsible with his money, respectful to his family, and very hard working. But *this* son had *never* had a "Welcome Home" party *nearly* as lavish as the one their father held for the screw-up son who came home in disgrace. He had done *everything* right, and yet his *brother*, who had done everything *wrong*, was showered with more love than the "righteous" brother could have imagined.

Now that's not fair, right? "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

We empathize with that brother, the one who was responsible with what he was given, who did all the right things, and had earned what should have been the respect of his father. Jesus himself has plenty of parables that talk about being responsible with what you have been given.

We believe in fairness. Of a hard day's work for a good day's wages. The good guys get the reward, and the bad guys get their just desserts. Karma and capitalism.

But with Jesus, context matters. Jesus isn't telling a story about the *responsible* son who stayed behind, and he isn't even telling a story about the *prodigal* son who ran off and came back. He's actually telling a story about a parent. About the one who said, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we *had* to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

He's telling the story of a parent who didn't give *up* on a child who had gone astray. Of someone who, instead of saying "too little, too late," chose to say... "I saved you a seat." He's telling the story of *God*. **To God, there is no such thing as "too little, too late;" to God *no one* is beyond saving, *no one* is "not worth the**

trouble;” and if God believes that... then we as followers of Christ should do a better job of *showing* it.

The Gospel of Luke records Jesus telling the parable of the Prodigal Son in one sitting, but it isn't the only story he told there. Luke 15 begins: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable: ‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?’”

After talking about that parable, he moves on to the next: “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”

And finally, after working through the messages of each of these stories, he brings it all together with the grand finale of the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the interest of time, I'm focusing on only a sliver of *each* of those stories this morning, but each one *ends* with the *searcher* rejoicing that what once was lost now is found. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son.

Jesus uses these stories to explain to the Pharisees and the muckety-mucks just *why* he is welcoming sinners and outcasts, and eating with them like they were family. See, I've got ninety-nine sheep, nine coins, and a loving, responsible son—he seems to say—*they've* got it figured out. But that *one* sheep, that *one* coin, and that *one* stupid kid of mine... they are out there, lost and alone and in need.

To a shepherd, a sheep on its own in the wilderness... was doomed. It was in very real danger from predators and poachers, and from falling into rivers and off of cliffs. A sheep without a flock, and without someone to care for it... that was a dead sheep.

And those of you who've had children travel far away, you *know* the kinds of fears that can run through your head. *Anything* could happen to them out there.

Jesus sought out what was lost. Sinners, yes: those who had done wrong by God and their fellow human beings. And *others*, too; those who were lost even though they *hadn't* done anything wrong...

Lepers and Samaritans and foreigners and the poor... people that had been outcast from society and had no flock to call home, Jesus sat with them, ate with

them, spoke to them, and cared for them. He spent more time with the “lost” than he did with those who had it all together. Even his own *disciples* had to *jog* to keep up with him.

When Jesus told the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, in those stories, really, *Jesus* was the shepherd, the old woman, and the father with two sons. The joy each of those characters had at the end of their stories is the same celebration Jesus has whenever one who is lost is gathered up and finds a home.

I don’t think we as a society, or even we as individuals, do as good a job as we *could* living up to those examples. I think it’s a mixture of a belief in “just desserts” (that people should get what they *deserve*) and in “fool me once, shame on you—fool me *twice*, shame on *me*.” You got yourself *into* this hole, why should *I* help dig you out... and even if I *did*, you’d probably wind up back at the bottom again eventually, and *I’d* be out of a *shovel* for my efforts.

Oh, sure, we may have forgiveness in our *hearts*, we may even be able to *reserve* judgment and *refrain* from *condemning* someone who’s travelled down a rocky path... but remember, all Pontious *Pilate* would do is “wash his hands” of a convicted criminal, and *Pilate* was the *bad* guy in the crucifixion story. **If we call ourselves followers of Christ, if we purport to worship *God* every Sunday, then we can’t be passive about the prodigal children of this world; we should follow Christ’s example, and pull out *all* the stops for them.**

And don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying “screw the ninety-nine sheep.” I’m not saying *neglect* our families, or our friends, or the people in our church or our community or our country because *somebody* out *there* needs help. The father of the two sons said it himself: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” The other nine coins were safe in the woman’s coinpurse, and the ninety-nine sheep were safe in the pasture with the dogs keeping them protected.

But Jesus had *special* focus for that which was lost. That which had no home, no family, no community, no safe place—whether it was *their* sins that had brought them to that place, the sins of their *fathers*, the sins of those with power *over* them... or even no sin at all. **There was *more* than just “room” at Christ’s table for those who had fallen by the wayside *or* those who had strayed through thought and deed... there was a special place *saved* for them. How can we not do the same?**

The shepherd in Jesus' parable was a *really* good shepherd. They had ninety-nine sheep! That's a *lot* for one person to manage, and they did a great job keeping their sheep fed, safe, cleaned, and exercised. But there was another sheep out there in the wilderness that didn't know the way to the pasture. There was a son, hungry and exhausted and ashamed, who needed to be welcomed into a home with open arms and *loving* celebration.

There are people of all walks of life across this wide world of ours who need someone to care for them. Who need people who love them, regardless of how they got where they are. Who need food and water, shelter and safety, work, joy... *fulfillment*.

There are people whose jobs were downsized, who don't have enough to scrape together for a permanent *address* to put on a job application. There are people who sought comfort in the arms of drugs and alcohol and abusive behaviors, only to find how empty and destructive those comforts are. There are people whose families and churches have barred their doors to them because they can't approve of who they are. There are ex-cons out of prison and veterans back from the wars who are living on the streets, sleeping in doorways lined with *spikes* just to stay out of the rain. Our culture looks *down* on food stamps while there are CEOs who make more money in a minute than *most* full-time workers make in a year.

How can we—as individuals, or as the society we make up—look at *both* the prodigal children *and* the lost sheep, and say “too little, too late?” Because we *do*. We make *final* judgments against the moral failings of others every day, *and* we make those *same* judgments on people who were just dealt a bad *hand*. And what's *worse*, those *judgments* we make stay *our* hands. There's always someone more *deserving* of this fatted calf. There's someone who won't *waste* it. There's someone who *never* made the mistake *you* made.

That was never Jesus' attitude. That was *never* the attitude of the Good Shepherd. And that was never the attitude of the Heavenly Father of *all* of *us* prodigal children—thank God for that. So when next we encounter someone whose life has led them astray, let us not forsake them. Let us be like the Christ we follow... and put another steak on the barbecue. Because there are a lot of people in this world who could *use* a “Welcome Home” party. Amen.