

“Lost and Found”

*Gathered up in Jesus – part #4
from umcdiscipleship.org*

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

[54] (Welcome, prayer)

Today’s parable is often called the story of the prodigal son. What is a prodigal? That’s not a very common word. A prodigal is one who spends lavishly or recklessly. However, there is a second meaning derived from this parable – a prodigal is also one who repents and returns home. We could call this parable the story of the lost or runaway son.

[55] I can relate to running away. When I was four years old, I ran away from “Tot Lot”, a summer program. My mom’s friend found me downtown, two blocks from the school and three miles from our home on a four-lane highway. Apparently, I told her I was just walking home. About a year later, I rode the school bus back from kindergarten about five extra miles so I could go to my friend’s house instead of getting off at home. I thought I could find something more fun to do, rather than stay under the protective care of my parents.

In some way, all of us desire to run away. Maybe we run away from problems. Maybe we cast off restraint and live recklessly. We are enticed by the thrill of adventure, or we simply wish to get away from our past. Yet, many times we do not anticipate the problems that we will encounter in new, unknown territory. In short, we become lost.

[56] The three main characters in this parable can tell us all lot about ourselves and our need for God’s love. Let’s look at each person in turn.

First there is the boy at the center of the story, the younger son. He asks for his inheritance early and simply leaves home. I’m pretty sure I would be offended if one of my children did that to me. Yet notice Jesus says nothing about the father’s objections. The father simply gives his son what he asks for and watches silently as his son takes the money and runs away.

[57] This wayward son wants to explore what the world has to offer. He travels far and spends recklessly. His high living leaves him penniless and

friendless. He is forced to work for a pig farmer – possibly the worst job imaginable.

[58] Have you ever visited a pig farm? My grandfather’s pig sty was my least favorite place to go. If you see live pigs at the county fair, they are usually washed and cleaned for show. Not these pigs. The lost son learned a lesson: when you work with pigs, you start to smell like a pig. And that is simply gross.

[59] This lost boy is so hungry, he considers eating pig slop. He made decisions he regrets. He has offended his father so much, his last resort is to beg for a job as a slave. Forget ever being a son again. At least his father would be righteous enough not to leave him on the street to starve. But frankly, the son has no confidence to think his father would ever forgive him.

Have you ever thought you destroyed a relationship by something you did or said? I have. I hate that sinking feeling in my stomach, anticipating seeing that person again. Now imagine thinking your own father would not forgive you. That would be awful.

We live in a world where we hope for forgiveness, but too often, we do not expect forgiveness. We live in a world where public figures fall from grace, and we do not hear many redemption stories. We live in constant fear of failure. Too often, we think, “If I mess up, I’m going to be ostracized forever. No one will ever forgive me again.”

[60] For this young man, the pain of hunger brought him to his senses. He took stock of his situation. This son knew his father was good, but he didn’t know how good until he took a chance and went home.

[61] At this point, the focus of the story shifts to the father. The father sees his son a long way off, walking the long road back home. How many times had his father stared down that road, waiting, hoping? How many painful, empty days went by, longing for his son to return, knowing there was nothing he could do except wait? Finally, one day, the father notices a figure in the distance. A long way off, he recognizes his son. He sees him; probably smelled him, too.

[62] Immediately the father runs to his boy and embraces him. Can you imagine? Hugs and kisses, pig-poop and all. The son starts to make his apology: “Dad, I’m sorry. I don’t deserve to be your son anymore.” But Dad accepts him

back. He calls for a robe to clothe his son, a sign of prosperity. You don't work with a robe on. He gives his son a ring, a symbol of authority. He calls for sandals, because only slaves go around barefoot. Robe, ring, sandals – These are all the exact opposite of what the son asked for. These are all signs the son is once again a full member of the family.

[63] I love that the father gives all these gifts without asking the boy to clean up first. The father is so happy, he has to throw a party immediately! His boy is back. There is nothing that the boy does himself to earn his forgiveness. Do you know what that's called? That's grace.

[64] Look at verse 24 again. It's beautiful. *“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.* That sounds like a great place to end the story. Yet, there are eight more verses.

Jesus saves his best punch for last. Jesus told this story, along with the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin, in front of a group of people that included tax collectors and “sinners”. [65] Back in verse 2, you find the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)

There are those who rejoice in God's grace, and there are those whose hearts become hard. God's grace and forgiveness are so good, they are almost too good to believe. When we see someone else get a break that they didn't deserve, we are tempted to become jealous.

I am the middle brother of three sons, so I'm both a younger brother and an older brother. There were times when I felt, maybe even said, “It's not fair how mom and dad let you get away with everything.” My guess is there is at least one other person in this room who has had similar thoughts about their family.

The Pharisees, the teachers of the law, you and I, and anyone else who thinks that grace isn't fair – we all need to learn this lesson from the second son. The truth is, we don't celebrate often enough. We think we have to work hard and not mess up, just to receive a little acceptance from God.

[66] That's why we need this final part of the story. As the oldest son sits outside, jealous and angry, his father comes to him, begging him to come inside

to the party. I wish my dad would beg me to come into a party! He wouldn't have to ask me twice!

The older son is just as lost as the younger. The older boy is lost in his thinking. His whole life, he has lived with this motto: “If I just keep my distance, I'll be OK with Dad.” How sad. I know people who would say, “I'm OK, as long as I don't mess up and make God notice me.”

[67] The father tries to correct this misconception. The father states, “Everything I have is yours.” (Luke 15:31b) But did the older son ever ask for it? The younger son certainly asked for his part! The prodigal misused it, but he asked for it. Maybe the older son was guilty of assuming that his father would never give him anything.

The father was lavish with both of his sons – the one who returned, and the one who was resentful. The father pursued both of his sons. The difference is, one boy received that love, and the other rejected it. It appears the oldest son had no joy in serving his father and being part of the family. He only looked for ways to become hardened.

The father makes no apologies for what the younger son has done. The oldest son misunderstands – the father did not reward the youngest son for his immoral behavior. He rewarded him for recognizing his mistake and returning to the greatest love he could receive. The father does not reward the younger boy for his sin; he rewards him for returning home. The father accepts the younger son's repentance. There is no blame, only joy in new life.

[68] Which son do you want to be? The one who receives the lavish, prodigal love of his father, or the one who is so resentful of others that not even a party can entice him to be part of the family? God is not impressed with our work. God is impressed with our compassion and ability to receive his love and pass it on.

God is so good to us! God pours out divine love on us, mercy and grace. God gave his only begotten son, to die on a cross so that we could have eternal life. (John 3:16) That is amazing. That is lavish, prodigal grace.

[69] Contrast the attitudes of the father and the oldest son toward the one who ran away and returned. The father did not complain when asked for money.

When the younger son repents and returns home, the father does not chide him. Dad does not dwell on the past. Dad celebrates the present. He invites everyone to join the party. But the older son wants to dwell on his brother's mistakes. The eldest disowns the youngest. Look at his words. "...when this son of yours ...comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" "Your son." Not, "My brother." (Luke 15:30) The older brother chooses resentment and bitterness instead of joy.

If this parable is about us and how we respond to grace, we must commit to that same lavish grace. May we never become like the older son. We cannot be jealous when God gives someone mercy and grace.

[70] Church, we need to celebrate more, not stand outside and miss the party! We need to expect God to send us prodigals – people who are messed up and need help. How do you think any of us got here in the first place? And when God send them to our doorsteps, do not tell them to clean up first. Just love them. Welcome them. Let the Holy Spirit do the cleaning. That's what it means to be fishers of people. We catch them, and God cleans them.

Praise God for the prodigals in our lives that teach us the true meaning of God's grace, and may we respond to that amazing grace ourselves.

Let's pray.

Memory verse: Luke 15:32 (NIV)

"...We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Reflection questions:

1. When have you enjoyed a real celebration, like a birthday or anniversary? What made that celebration enjoyable?
2. Have you ever run away? Literally or emotionally? From what?
3. When have you run away from God? When have you run back to God?
4. Do you know someone who has returned to God? How does their story impact you?
5. To whom is God calling you to show lavish, prodigal love? How will you love them?