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Riverside Covenant Church
Daniel S. Teefey
Luke 15:11-23 – My Two Sons

Read Luke 15:11-23.

When we think of this parable, we generally think of it as the story of one son. And we know that he took his dad's inheritance and he went off and foolishly spent it all and then came back. But this is really the story of two sons. While it is true that the one son goes off and spends everything, there is his brother too. And he seemingly does everything right. He stays at home and tends the farm while his younger brother is out living wildly. And he does the chores and obeys his dad. He is productive and the good son. He is rightfully frustrated when his brother comes back and seems to get all of his father's praises.

The other important thing to notice about this text is that it is in **a chapter of stories about the lost.** The chapter begins with what we discussed last week, **the lost sheep.** A shepherd has 100 sheep. One gets away from the rest. The Shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one, picks it up and puts it on his shoulders, and then brings it home. Upon finding the lost sheep he rejoices.

Then we have a **story about a lost coin.** A woman has ten coins and she loses one. She doesn't just forget about it and leave it, she searches the house for it until she finds it. And when she finds it, she rejoices because she has found it.

So the pattern of the stories is really pretty simple. You have some sheep, you have some coins, you have some sons, you lose one, but don't leave it or forget it, and when you find it, you rejoice.

I was reading this chapter again this week and I thought, **well that about wraps it up. Seriously, Jesus was it really necessary to explain this concept 3 times in a row and with three different things.** I get it, don't disregard the lost, get excited when they come back. It seems so simple.

And as I was thinking about this passage this week . . . I felt God almost laughing at me. **“You don't get it, do you?” “You think you understand, but you really do not have a clue do you?”**

You are not the one chasing after the lost. You are not the one by my side in the flock. You are not the one doing what I am asking of you. **You are the one who is lost.** You were the one who was lost. I always come and get you.

That is when I hunch down in my chair at my desk real low and pout for a few minutes. It would be one thing if I could say that I have it all together all the time and that wherever Jesus is, I am right there. But that would be a lie and God knows it.

I think when we are honest we know that we are lost a lot. We remember **the disciples** as the super-Christians or the slow to faith folk in the New Testament, but their problem is that they were lost a lot too. We find ourselves as we read the Bible, saying “**hey, geniuses**, if he can walk on water, I bet he can turn a few fish and loaves of bread into a whole lot more.” I mean, seriously, Jesus is healing people right and left in front of them, and they are like, “ummmm, who are you again and who did you say sent you?”

And I read these stories and I laugh and think that if these things happened around me today, **I would be right with Jesus all the time.** But the truth is that I am not. I have a great family, great friends, a great house, a great job about everything and I find myself not saying, “God you are amazing, what are you calling me to today,” but, “God my lawn mower is cutting a little uneven and sounds a little odd, when am I going to get a new one?” or “God, I know you want me to spend some time with my neighbors this summer, but it is a lot more fun hanging out with my other friends.”

We all are or have been and sometime still are lost. It is that human predicament that is unavoidable. Sometimes we are there with God and other times we are no where near God.

Dana and I are going through something similar with Adelaide. One day she will be little miss perfect and a complete joy to be around and the next day she will act like we are aliens that must be opposed at every opportunity. One night she will flail around her bed like we are torturing her and the next night she will ask to lead the prayers.

Ebbs and flows are the nature of our faith journeys. One day we are in the pasture chilling with the other sheep, the next day we are wondering around in the highway by ourselves.

It is not just inconvenient for us to be lost at times, it is downright dangerous. As many of you know I grew up on a **horse farm** and we used to get calls periodically that our horses had gotten out of one of our pastures. Anyone that has ever raised any type of animal knows that this happens every once in a while no matter what precautions you thought you were taking. Generally, the horses would get out through a hole they had made in the fence and would simply wander to the nearest patch of green grass. No harm done. Other times, **I remember horses wandering onto the golf course, which did not make the course owners very happy as large hoofed animals do not walk gently on golf course greens and have a tendency to leave not so pleasant gifts behind wherever they go.** The worst times, though, were when the horses would get out and wander into a highway or busy road. It was downright dangerous for both the horses and anyone that might drive up into them. Getting lost and ending up in less than ideal places can be very serious.

A few weeks ago you probably heard the story of the **local guy, Mark Albrecht**, who moved from West Lafayette to Washington state for a new job. He was an experienced hiker and Eagle Scout, and decided one day to go on a solo backpacking adventure in North Cascades National Park. Unfortunately, he wasn't fully prepared for the dense, low-level fog that enveloped the park during his hike. The fog turned his easy descent into a test for survival. He had told park rangers that he would be back from his multiple night trip on a Wednesday morning. On his downward descent, however, Mark missed one of the switchbacks and became hopelessly lost, unable to get his bearings. Even the sun was obscured and the terrain was spotted with snow.

As Wednesday and Thursday passed without anyone hearing from Mark, search parties were assembled and authority after authority expected the worst. The weather was bad and cold and many speculated that Mark was too inexperienced and unprepared to survive. Days passed with no signs of Mark and little hope.

Then Sunday came. The fog dissipated and an alive Mark saw the sun for the first time in days. He got his bearings – he was about a mile off of his intended course – and he began to descend down the mountain along a drainage culvert. On Sunday afternoon he emerged along an area road and was greeted by another hiker who knew that dozens of volunteers had been looking for a lost backpacker.

An article I read said, Mark's father, Everette, was overwhelmed when he heard that his son was alive. He said, **“we wanted it to be good news and it was. Right now, my whole family is thankful to God.”**

He was lost, but now he is found.

Our world is filled with stories of lostness.

The biggest danger is not knowing that we are lost.

No one ever intends to get lost. We are usually enticed by something that calls us gradually out of what we know. Several of the books we read to our kids deal with this issue with regard to strangers. **One of the Berenstain Bear books in particular is called don't talk to strangers** and Dana and I have discussed it thoroughly because at the beginning of the book it sounds like a blanket prohibition of talking to anyone you don't know and that all people you don't know are bad people. The book redeems itself by pointing out that very few strangers are bad, but you have to be careful. Anyway, the focus on the book is not being enticed by a stranger and the **example is Brother who is flying an airplane** when he sees a stranger with a really big airplane. He runs over to him and the stranger invites him to get into the truck with him to see how far his plane will fly. Filled with excitement Brother steps towards the truck, but Sister bear stops him. Then Papa and Mama bear explain the danger that Brother could have been in. He let his love for airplanes affect what he knew he was supposed to do, which was to walk away from the stranger.

Nobody sets off to get lost, but we usually make choices based upon particular wants and desires and find ourselves lost.

Addictions are like this. The first time getting drunk is not a big deal, it is one time. A year later and excessive drinking 3 times a week then becomes normal. **Our lostness becomes a new reality of sin.**

If we look at Jesus' parable, we see that the younger son probably thinks he is doing a good thing. He clearly wants his independence and wants to be away from the chores and obligations of the farm life. And he probably thinks he will go into the city and make a huge name for himself or develop even more wealth. You can imagine a million different fantasies running through his mind of how glorious it will be to be free from his father's control and care.

I have never heard of a high school student saying, “when I get older, I want to stay right here.” It is always the cool thing to say no matter where you are at that you want to get out of town after graduation. The home is no longer good enough and there must be bigger and brighter things out in the world to discover.

That is really what the younger son is doing. He does not intend to throw everything away, he intends to do better than he had done at home. But the cool life proves more difficult than he imagined and he finds himself in a foreign land with nothing. And things got worse, because after he had spent all of his money, a severe famine struck the area and it was extremely expensive to buy food or the other supplies necessary to survive. Conditions for the younger son became awful. It got so bad that he was forced to find a job as a pig feeder. He was so hungry that our text says that he was jealous towards the pigs for what they were eating. That is lost.

The dictionary defines “lost” as “having gone astray or missed the way, bewildered as to place, location, etc.

Generally, we only understand this parable as being about the younger son and his being lost, but both sons are lost in this passage. The first son is lost because he was looking for adventure. The second son is lost because he does not understand grace. This is not a story about one son, but about two.

If you remember, last week we discussed that these parables in this chapter of Luke are being told by Jesus in response to the Pharisees' anger that Jesus is hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. **There is an interesting parallel to these groups in the parable that Jesus tells of the two sons and a father.** The first son is lost because he has wandered off into a world of sin. He is living wildly. He is doing everything that he was taught not to do. In Jesus' illustration this son is the tax collectors and the sinners. They have taken what they have and have squandered it away in lives that were inconsistent with God.

The second son, however, is lost too, but for a different reason. The second son has done everything his father has asked. He says, **“All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.”** This son's problem is not following the rules, but understanding that nature of God. He is lost too and he is used to illustrate the Pharisees who were more concerned with following the letter of the law than they were with truly knowing and understanding the heart of God.

If being lost in our spiritual lives is **“having gone astray or missed the way”** then you can surely get lost in many ways.

One thing that is strikingly different about this parable compared with the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin earlier in the chapter is that in each one of the others stories those things that are lost are aggressively sought after. The emphasis is on our God who comes after us and pursues us until He finds us and brings us back home. This is very powerful imagery and is absolutely true of the character of God. God is relentless in trying to bring us into a right relationship with him.

In this parable though, it seems as if the father does not pursue the youngest son once he decides to take his inheritance and split. It seems as if the father just lets him go. Now, I doubt this is entirely true because I don't know any father that wouldn't plead with their son not to make such a foolish decision. I imagine this father did that. But he does not go looking for the son like the shepherd went looking for the sheep or the woman went looking for the coin.

This is the first parable dealing with humans as the example and so I think Jesus is doing something more with this parable than he was the others. The first two parables clearly emphasize God's passion and aggressiveness is coming and finding us when we are lost. The parable of the two sons, though, reveals that we have a role to play in our lostness. God never comes, finds us, and drags us back home. He could do that. We could be compelled to come and follow and go back home. Police do this all the time with kids that run away. **Kid runs away, parents call the police, police find the kid, and the kid is dragged back home. He is compelled back.**

Returning from being lost spiritually, however, requires that we respond to God's invitation. In Jesus' parable, the younger son reaches a point in the depths of the horrific life he had created for himself where the text says, “he came to his senses.” I love this. He realizes just how wacked out his situation and his reasoning has been. Yes, he is desperate, but for the first time he realizes just how lost he is.

He has two options: give up, write himself off and call it a life because he has lost all that he has, his pride, his dignity, his wealth or he can walk the long, difficult path back to his father. He chooses to go back. And he is truly repentant. He is not going back expecting anything.

You know when we go back to God after sinning, we often expect everything. We actually expect everything after sinning before we even sin. We say to ourselves, what is the big deal if I sin if I will be forgiven for it later. You're on risky ground. True repentance not only seeks to turn from your sin, but takes steps to eliminate it in the future.

The younger son is truly repentant. He says, **“I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”**

He puts one foot in front of the other and starts the long journey home. The parable begins with the younger son walking away from his dad and farm. Now, he has turned completely around and is walking back towards God. That is repentance. He is walking to the farm and the text says, **“while he was still a long way off, his father saw him . . .”**

I don't know about you, but I am thinking. “Dude, run!” The text says that his dad started to run towards him, and I picture him taking off his belt as he is jogging towards the kid or maybe he is loading his gun or perhaps he is screaming and yelling, “what in the world are you doing.” “You said you were too good for us, that you wanted something better, that you were too big for this small town . . .” And all these images rush through my head of how the father should have reacted to his disrespectful young son.

But the text simply says, **“his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”** And the son starts unloading on his dad. I am not worthy to be your son anymore, but make me one of your servants. I have sinned against you and God. And he is going on and on in repentance before his father. But his father says, get him the best robe, put a ring on his finger, get him sandals and kill the fattened calf because we will celebrate.

He was lost, but was now found and the father wanted to celebrate.

In our Christian lives it is impossible to avoid being lost. No matter what, we will find ourselves lost at times. The question, however, is what will we do when we are lost. Will we wallow in self-defeat, will we frantically scramble getting more and more lost, or will we stop, turn around, and start walking back to

our Heavenly Father. That is repentance and indeed cause for celebration.

The only thing worst than being lost is believing that you will never find your way out. If you turn, if you take the first step back towards God you will find him running towards you with open arms to get you the rest of the way back. Remember the imagery of the lost sheep. The shepherd picks the sheep up and carries it home.

Jesus' story did not end there though. There is this other brother, who looked like he had it all together the whole time, but he is indeed lost too. The older son is actually working in the fields when he hears the celebration and so he comes back to the house and the servants tell him what has happened. He could have joined the celebration for his repentant brother, but he doesn't. He stays outside steaming with anger. And what happens. The Father goes to him and tells him, **"you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."**

The younger son was to find God by baring himself before God as a disobedient and foolish sinner. The older son was to find God by turning from his self-righteousness towards the heart of God for all that truly turn to God.

But here is what I want you to see as a theme running through Luke 15. The shepherd pursues the one lost sheep. The woman pursues the one lost coin. The Father runs to greet his repentant younger son. The Father goes out to plead with his obedient son. God is active. God is not lost. God is not gone. We are often lost, but God is ready and willing to bring us home.

Objects are lost because people look where they are not instead of where they are. When we are lost, the problem is that we are looking for God where he is not. The younger son looked for God in wild living. The older son looked for God in following the rules and being the "good" kid. But God is not in our wants, desires, comforts, pride, or anywhere else in us. Finding God in our lostness is finding our way through all of those distractions.

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