

Rejoice! The Lost Are Found!
By Jason Huff
Psalm 119:169-176, Jeremiah 50:4-7, Luke 15

Our third Scripture reading today comes from Luke 15. Listen now to God's Word. "Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 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.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, '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.'"

Is there anything worse than being lost? It's the stuff of nightmares...the thing we still remember when we were four or five years old...the thing that most of us fear even now. Being lost is disorienting. We don't know where we are or how to get back on the right path. I'm not sure if the massive sales of GPS units have more to do with the fear of getting lost or the fear men have of asking for directions. There are lots of scary things that take away our sense of control that thrill us...riding roller coasters or watching horror movies, for example. But I've never met someone who was genuinely excited about getting lost who had no means of finding their way home. Even the adventurous hiker has a map and a compass for a guide. The fear of being lost is more primal, more instinctual...we need to know how to get home.

Our society as of late has been a place of lostness. With 15% unemployment, it means that a lot of people have lost their jobs, and with it we often lose our sense of purpose and direction. In our society, divorce has become part of the status quo, but with the end of a marriage comes a loss of the sense of family and a knowledge of where home actually is. We have a week like this last one where we hear of the death of a famous actress and the crumbling of a sportsman's image, and those make us feel more lost. If wealth and fame and talent don't mean happiness, can't slow down the march of time and death, then what hope do we have? Telephone polls say our country is on the wrong path...we as a society say that we are lost. It affects us more deeply than we imagine.

It's no wonder, then, that Jesus talked about our human condition in terms of being lost. We instantly identify with the metaphor. We know what He's talking about and we relate. It's one of the reasons that one of the stories in today's lesson has become so beloved, even by those outside the faith. But when we look at these parables together, as it seems Jesus originally told them, we learn so much about God's relationship with us and who God is. These parables get to the heart of God's love for us.

First, what these parables teach us is that we are of incredible significance to God. In every story, whatever is lost is of significance. The shepherd in this story goes after a lost sheep. He has ninety-nine more; why does he really care about the one who wanders away? It's because the sheep is of real value. The sheep matters to him. We know that because finding a lost sheep could be a real danger. A flock of sheep with a shepherd nearby was reasonably safe, but a lone sheep wandering around was an easy target for a wolf or a bear or other hungry animals. And sheep are really dumb! They have a tendency to get caught in briar patches or in low-hanging brush. When sheep get scared, they freak out. They don't follow the shepherd. They plop down and don't move, even if danger is right in front of them. That's why the shepherd has to carry the sheep on his back. The shepherd puts himself at risk to find the sheep.

Meanwhile, there's also more to the story of the woman with ten silver coins. Each of those coins would have been worth at least a day's wages. For the average woman of her day, it represented a good deal more work. But there's more to it than that...ten silver coins were the standard dowry for a young woman of the era, which is probably what Jesus was referring to. This wasn't just money to buy food or supplies; this was the money set aside for her marriage. She searches diligently because the money represented her ability to have a husband which again, in that era, was a virtual necessity for survival. Finding the coin was not just a matter of being wealthy but having a future.

In the final story, we see the story of the father with two sons. The relationship can't be much closer. The lost in this story are family...not servants, not hired hands, but sons. Now some people might be concerned that the father in this story is not actively looking for the prodigal like the shepherd hunting down the sheep or the woman searching for her coin. But that's also part of the story. When the story is most like our own, the details get clearer. The sons are of such incredible value to the father because they are his flesh and blood. But the father shows love for the son in so many ways here. The youngest son, by demanding the inheritance early, shows his incredible disrespect for his father. In that culture, it was not unlike saying that the father was dead to him. And yet, rather than casting the son out for his disrespect, which was his right, the father grants the son his wish. He loves his son enough to let him go, to live his own life. He doesn't do it to say "good riddance" or "I told you so." He does it because his son is already dead to him even before he leaves home. The son's mind is made up. The only way to gain him back is to let him go.

But the incredible value of the son doesn't end there. Long before the son arrives home, the father sees him and is filled with compassion for him, we're told, and he races out to greet him. We're told that he runs out to meet him and throws his arms around him. Now there's two problems with this in ancient Jewish culture. First off, this was a public display of affection. For the man to have run to greet his son would have meant that he would have done it in full view of the whole village. This was not a private matter any more but one where the father accepts his son back in front of everybody. The second is that the father runs. In ancient Israelite culture, the man of the house didn't run anywhere. He wore a long tunic that covered his legs; not only was it really hard to run in that outfit, but the outfit was symbolic of his stature. The father is embarrassing himself in front of everybody to greet his son. And yet he doesn't care. The son is of such incredible value to him that propriety means nothing. His son means far more to him than his public standing. Nothing is going to get between him and the son who has been found.

As we think about this today, it means that we need to be aware of our incredible significance to God. As the Psalmist said in Psalm 8, God created us "just a little lower than the angels and crowned us with glory and honor." Colossians 1:16 says that all things were created "by God and for God." James 1:18 teaches us that God "chose to give us birth through the word of truth so we would become a sort of first fruits of all He created." God created us so that He could show us love and we could show it to each other. And this means that He thinks all of us have significance. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, you matter to God! You are worth His diligent search to find You. And think of it this way...a coin that's been in the mud and in the dirt still has value. You clean it up and dust it off and it spends! In the same way, we can't judge those who've fallen morally and spiritually, who've failed in some way. They still matter to God. And if you are one of those who have fallen, know that God wants to find you still! Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners for that very reason; they were his *friends*. If you know that you have been caught up in sin and want to be cleaned of all the muck and the mire, Jesus is waiting at the table in your heart right now, to dine with you and to guide you and, if you are willing, to send the Holy Spirit to wash you and make you whole.

On that note, we come to the second thing the parable teaches: *we are all lost and estranged from God*. As the church, we have done a real disservice to this story by calling it the parable of the prodigal son. It's actually the parable of the prodigal *sons*. The first son is the obvious prodigal...he does everything but say outright that his father is dead to him, he sells off his portion of the estate almost immediately, he heads as far away from home as possible, and spends his money like an idiot. That's the most literal way to understand the Greek; he is totally senseless with the money. It's the exact opposite of what happens in verse 17; he literally "comes to himself," he regains his senses, and goes back home. He is in every sense the lost and dead son who has been found, who has come back to life.

But the second son is the one we really should be worried about. The second son is the good son, the one who stayed home, the one who has never disobeyed. But when he finds out that his brother has come home and that his father is celebrating, he doesn't just get confused or upset. A torrent of anger and rage comes out of him. He refuses to go to the party. And the way the story is told, the father begs him to come in and he still snubs the offer. And what he does say tells us that he might have been living at home, but he's off the reservation. He's bitter. He says he's been serving like a slave, not like a son. He says he's never disobeyed, not once, which is surely an exaggeration. He rages that he's never been offered anything. He goes so far as to slander his brother, saying literally that his brother has *devoured* his father's property with prostitutes, which the text doesn't confirm. But his hatred isn't directed towards his brother; it's directed towards his father who welcomed his wayward brother back. This isn't frustration or misunderstanding; the older brother has been angry with his father for a long time to have this kind of fury. And unlike the story of the younger brother, the older brother's story is left unfinished. Does he reconcile with his father and his brother? Does he wind up checking out physically like he already has mentally and emotionally? Does he eventually wind up outside the family while the younger son is accepted? We simply don't know. It's not the ending most of us would write.

What this means for us is that we need to examine where we fit on the spectrum. Some here today fit the first pattern; we lived lives far apart from God and came to our senses. Others of us have always been a part of some church somewhere; we've always thought of ourselves as a part of God's family. But as the Pharisees in today's story prove, sometimes being the elder brother who never left home can be the worse place to be. Some of us are grateful to God for all His blessings and don't feel any resentment. We know that even if we haven't made huge errors in judgment in our lives, we still have sinned and are just in much need of God's forgiveness as anybody else. That's a good place to be. But others of us grew up being told that we needed to work for God's love, that we had to gain His respect and earn our place in heaven by being good. That kind of thinking isn't biblical, and it leads to resentment. We start judging people who haven't lived as righteously as we have. We decide who's in and who's out based on our own limited knowledge. And we wind up angry with God that He winds up accepting people we would ourselves condemn. And the irony of it is, those of us who have been a part of God's Kingdom since we were young have a greater share in it already. Like the older brother in the story, all God has He is giving to us even now! There is nothing that can buy the years of time we've spent in His house, being able to know Him and worship Him. I've talked to enough people who've come to God later in life to know that there may be no greater gift given to us by God and by our parents than the gift of a lifetime spent in His church and in His presence.

This resentment can hit any of us. It was me, at one point. I was the kid who followed all the rules, who never hit back, who was the one the teacher always called on who knew the answers. But following all the rules didn't make me happy; it just made me angry when other people didn't follow them. And it turned out that I got angry at God when He didn't play by the rules either. When being nice didn't make you popular in school, I wasn't real happy with God. When getting good grades and a college education weren't the ticket to a high-paying job and success, I was frustrated with God. When I followed the rules and yet my dad died before the age of fifty, I was mad at God. I never left the church; I still followed most of the rules. But I resisted what God wanted to do in my life for a long time, and some places in my heart grew really dark. I still have to battle my anger sometimes. But that spiritual battle just goes to prove to me that all of us, every last one of us, has gone away in ways both large and small. We are all prodigals, all lost, all needing God to find us and bring us home.

But that leads me to my final point, perhaps the best point of all: *God rejoices whenever the lost are found*. All three of the parables in today's lesson are unique, making different analogies and different connections, all complementing one another. But the one thing that's true in all three is this: when the lost are found, God celebrates. There's a big party. There's rejoicing in heaven even over one lost soul that repents and comes into relationship with God. And these aren't ordinary shindigs. Everybody is invited, friends and neighbors...and in the case of the prodigal son, we see the ancient equivalent of the red carpet rolled out. The son who was lost is greeted with a robe and a ring and sandals, which all mark him as a part of the family. Not only that, but they celebrate with the fattened calf, the one out of the entire herd that's been raised for the purpose of a feast, the one that they've spent tons of money and energy on to make perfect for the event. This isn't just a party at McDonalds; this is renting the Concorde and flying to London to party with the queen kind of celebrating! As we learned before, we are so important to God that He isn't worried about looking like a fool to show his extravagant love for us. Paul calls the cross of Christ that saves us foolishness, and yet in 1 Corinthians 1:25 he says, "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." Jesus came, telling us that God's Kingdom is coming and is already here – a Kingdom full of grace and truth, a Kingdom where everyone rejoices when another person comes to know God's forgiveness and love. The Kingdom is not just for us, but for everyone who might come to God, rich and poor, wise and foolish.

So now the next move is ours. We know that God loves us with a love beyond measure, a love that reflects our incredible value to Him, a love so great it might even seem like foolishness. We've all fallen short of what God meant for us to be, whether we've strayed far from God in many ways or just said goodbye to Him in our hearts. And God wants to celebrate our homecoming with more than cake and ice cream...He wants to rejoice, to literally create joy in our hearts, and He wants to give us a homecoming gift...the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will make that joy permanent. And so we've got some choices to make. Maybe we've already come home – perhaps we need to choose to spread God's joy to others. Maybe we're the son or the sheep who has wandered away – we need to choose to come home. And perhaps we're the son who's strayed in his heart but not with his feet – and we too need to turn around in our hearts and receive forgiveness for our waywardness. The Father wants to draw you to Himself – your true home, where you will never be lost again – if you are willing to humble yourself and flee the distant country. What choice will you make?