

“Lost and Found”

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Christ the King Lutheran Church
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Once again, we have one of the more famous parables Jesus ever told. The parable of the Prodigal Son. It's one that is not only well known in the church, it is pretty well known outside of the church—one of those handful of items from the Bible that people who have never read the Bible might be at least a little familiar with, like Noah's Ark, the Good Samaritan, or the parting of the Red Sea. It's a great story, well told by Jesus, with lots of details and descriptions, making it relatively easy for the teller to re-tell, and providing lots of places for the listener to connect and remember.

In fact, it's so well known, that many of us who have grown up in the church might be tempted to think that we know everything there is to know about it, that we've learned its lesson, that there is little more for us to teach us. A few years back, theologian Mark Allen Powell tested out that theory, that the story had become so familiar that many of us had become numb to its meaning. And while what he discovered was not exactly what he thought he went looking for, it turned out to be quite a find.

He sat down individually with a dozen or so seminarians, students studying Bible and theology, studying to be pastors. He asked each of them to simply retell this story of the Prodigal Son (or the Lost and Found Son) putting in as much detail as they could remember. Every one of them hit on all the major themes and recalled most of the main details, too. A father, two sons, early inheritance, distant country, dissolute living, feeding the pigs, coming to his senses, treat me like a slave, father running to meet him, get a robe, a ring, some sandals, kill the fatted calf, dead but now alive, lost but now found, the angry older brother, son you are always with me, but we had to celebrate your brother's return.

But he noticed something, some of the other details that got lost in the retelling. In fact, it was so startling that he decided to continue the test with a larger pool of students—North American Seminary students—and found the same thing. Fewer than 10% of these pastoral students, when they retold the story made any mention that there was a famine in the distant country the younger son had gone to. Amid all the other details, this one was lost.

So he decided to continue the study—this time in Russia, with theological students and orthodox priests in St. Petersburg. Same drill, they were asked individually to retell the story with all the details they remembered. But in Russia, over 80% of the story re-tellers remembered the detail of the famine. That arriving in the far-away country, and having wasted his money, a **famine** hit and he was in need. Something about their context, Powell ventured a guess, helped that detail to stand out more, much more in Russia than in did in the US and Canada. A history of scarcity, still in recent-enough memory, an experience of want that was perhaps more widespread among Russians, particularly in the generation emerging from Soviet Rule, that insured that they did not lose or forget that detail.

So he continued the study, this time in East Africa, with Christians in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia, expecting that they, like the Russians, would certainly not lose the detail about the famine. And, true enough, the vast majority there remembered this detail, too. But even more significant to him was the fact that along with the detail of the famine in the far-away country, those telling the story in East Africa highlighted another detail, too. That as a stranger in a strange land, when he and the entire country was in need, no one gave him any help. Nearly everyone retelling the story in that context emphasized that detail.

Among the different conclusions Powell drew from this study, he found how much our own context influences the way we read the story, which lessons we learn from it, what takeaways we discover in its telling. And the Russian lessons learned, and the East African takeaways had different focus than the North American ones.

For years, we in the US and others in the Western World have emphasized the moral nature of this story. How the son in asking for his inheritance early was more or less wishing his father was already dead. How he wasted the good gifts he got from his father—prostitutes, loose living, bad choices. How in coming to his senses he knows he can no longer expect to be treated like a son to his father, since, after all, he had been such a great disappointment to him. In our mainline western churches, many of us tend to identify most with that responsible elder brother. The one who never strayed. The one who was rightly upset that this disappointing brother got the party he never got. That's where we tend to focus our

attention, not on the famine, not on the fact that no one helped the son in need, and much of the time not even on what a great disappointment that younger son had actually been.

Writing in the *Christian Century*, Pastor Emily Heath recalls a colleague's funeral sermon for a gifted young man who had taken his own life after what felt to him like a huge failure on his part. "He felt like he had *disappointed* everyone who had ever loved him," said the pastor about the young man. "And I'm sure he had," continued the pastor. "But then so have I, so have you, so have we all." As much as we have become accustomed to identifying with the elder brother in our retelling of this parable, I suspect that there is a lot of the prodigal son in us all, a lot of that guy who has disappointed the very people who love him, living in each and every one of us, no matter how good our grades, how impressive our résumés, how decent our jobs, how comfortable our retirements.

We hear that disappointment in the faith stories we're privileged to share in again this Lenten season at CtK. Sons who feel they are disappointments to their fathers, and fathers who have disappointed their sons. Young people who are disappointed in their church and who feel themselves to be a disappointment to the people who have nurtured their faith. I hear disappointment in the voices of those who share their stories around hospital beds or when preparing for a funeral service. I hear it in staff reviews and council meetings, with confirmation parents and choir members.

I know that I have been a disappointment to some of you from time to time as your pastor—too much change or not enough, too much focus here and not enough there. You've told me directly and in person for which I'm honestly grateful, and you've let me know by anonymous letters and indirect discourse which are perhaps less helpful. And the fact that I, too have been disappointed by certain aspects of our shared ministry—both by circumstance and coincidence, by actions and certain inaction on the part of those who call this congregation home—that does not balance or lessen for me the feeling that comes from my having disappointed both individuals and a congregation I care for deeply.

Like Pastor Heath said, recalling the words of her pastor friend's funeral sermon, we all know what it feels like to have disappointed the very people who love us. Truth is, at one time or another we have all disappointed everyone who has ever loved us. God included.

That's real. There's no escaping that truth, no running away from that reality. But neither can we run away from the reality of God's grace. Neither can we even be fully lost from God's loving mercy. None of us is ever so lost that we can't be found, never so much a disappointment that we cannot be reconciled. God, like the father in our story, does not allow these disappointments, real as they may be, to define us. God runs down the road to meet us, throws loving arms around us, hushes our awkward, over-rehearsed speeches, and celebrates with us our return. Over and over again, God celebrates our return. The lost has now been found, the dead have now been given new life. We **have** to celebrate.

During this season of Lent, during this time of deeper reflection and repentance and preparation for the new life we celebrate in the Christ, we cry out for God to show us the way. Show us the way home, we pray, back to those places beyond disappointments, beyond our flaws and our faults, back to the places, the pathways, the people God created us to be. Our disappointments are many, our failures our real, but so is the grace and mercy of a God who seeks us out when we're lost, who finds us and shows us the way, who runs down the road to meet us, unashamed of what a spectacle it must be to celebrate our return in this way. But celebration is what God does best. Finding, forgiving, reconciling, restoring, celebrating, feasting, singing and dancing—these are the things our God does best. Even when we refuse to give God a chance, even when we think ourselves too much of a disappointment, God finds us, shows us the way, and welcomes us home again.

Oh wanderer come home, you're not too far.
So lay down your hurt, lay down your heart
Come as you are.

Amen.