

Luke 15:1-32

Being Found

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Scripture

We continue our journey through Lent today reflecting on familiar stories in the Gospel of Luke and connecting them to our own lives, thousands of years and miles away from the world of Jesus and his first followers. Today's stories are examples of parables the author of Luke imagined Jesus told along the way to Jerusalem where he would ultimately spend the last days of his life. Parables use ordinary things that listeners are very familiar with to make a point. In Jesus' parables the point being made was very often a surprise and was good news to some people and bad news, or at least scary news, to others.

This is Luke 15:1-10:

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "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? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ "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? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (NRSV)

Sermon

Both of these stories about something that was lost being found end with an invitation to rejoice and celebrate with friends and neighbors, to have a party. In the last 12 months, one of the things the pandemic took from us was our parties. Our children have missed birthday parties with extended family and classmates. Moms and dads have missed school holiday parties with their children and baby

showers. Work teams have missed co-worker retirement parties and promotion celebration happy hours. Grandparents have missed graduation parties and wedding receptions. We have missed a lot of opportunities to celebrate.

Since we haven't partied very much in the last year, I am going to ask you to think back to pre-pandemic times, when parties happened more frequently, when it wasn't uncommon to be invited to a celebration. Right now, most of us are so hungry for social interaction that if we received an invitation to celebrate anything safely, we would probably accept the invitation immediately.

Happy National Cereal Day, by the way. Be sure you celebrate today!

But we haven't always been so desperate.

In other seasons of life, we have been invited and even chosen not to accept invitations to parties.

There have been times we couldn't attend a celebration because we had something else on our calendars that conflicted or someone in our household was sick. Sometimes we choose not to accept an invitation because we don't want to run into our ex or there is something about the party that makes us uncomfortable. My son was invited to a paintball birthday party once when he was in junior high. I decided not to allow him to accept the invitation because of something my brother, an avid hunter, said about paintball guns. He said he thought we should teach kids that it is never ok to point a gun at another human being, even if it's a game. My son *wanted* to celebrate his friend's birthday but didn't attend that particular party.

But have you ever gotten an invitation to a party and chosen not to go because you *didn't want* to actually celebrate what was being celebrated? Maybe it was a party for a co-worker who got the promotion you deserved? Or the wedding reception for the couple you didn't think should be getting married? Or the graduation party for the person you know didn't write even one of their own papers in college? Or how about the coming home party for the adult son who caused chaos in the family before he suddenly disappeared?

This is Luke 15:11-32:

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he

squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'^[c] ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, '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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.'"

The end of this story brings us back to the beginning of this series of lost and found stories, back to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, and the question of whether they will accept the invitation to the party God is throwing, to which everyone is invited, or whether they will choose to remain outside the door, like the older son in this third story. One of the reasons I love this story is

that it leaves us wondering if the older son ever went inside. It forces us to imagine and to wonder.

This is one of the characteristics that make scholars think these three stories, or something very much like them, were part of the oral tradition that can be traced back to Jesus. In other words, it is likely Jesus told stories like these stories. However, it is likely the verses at the end of the coin and sheep stories about rejoicing in heaven over the repentance of sinners were added by the author of Luke to serve his own pastoral interests decades later. For Jesus, these stories were not about the actions of “sinners.” These stories were and are about the action of God, God’s willingness to pursue us when we are lost, the over-the-top welcome of God, completely motivated by God’s intense love for every single person.

I’m curious...where do you see yourself in these stories? Are you like the coin, waiting for someone to notice you hidden off to the side? Are you like the lost sheep, having wandered off, hoping for the shepherd to come and find you and bring you into the safety of community? Are you the younger son who chose to walk away from community for some reason? Or are you the older son or the Pharisees and scribes who have always done what has been expected? Maybe Jesus’ inclination to include everyone scares you, maybe you think that kind of inclusion will surely cause everything to go off the rails and make things too messy.

The cool thing about these stories is, no matter who you are, there is an invitation here for you. It is an invitation to turn from the way things are and turn toward the vision God has for the world. In his book, *God Has a Dream: A Vision for Hope in Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes from God’s perspective, “I have a dream...Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world where ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, where there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God’s family, My Family.”¹

¹ Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 19-20.

These lost and found stories invite us to be part of the rejoicing, to celebrate being found ourselves and to seek out the ones who are lost and then to celebrate their found-ness too. I want to be clear, though, when I talk about someone being lost, I don't mean they are lost because they don't believe the "right" things or because they choose a different faith tradition or no faith tradition. God's love is not confined to one belief system.

When I talk about someone who is lost, I mean someone who doesn't yet believe in their worth, who hasn't yet found the place they belong or the community to which they belong.

Being found, knowing your worth and being accepted as you are, for who you are, is life-changing and I believe it is world-changing too. People who know they are loved and supported and encouraged change the world every day. Because that is how love works.

Every time love finds someone and brings them into community, there isn't less love for the rest of us.

There is more. More cake. More candles. More feasting. More balloons. More music. More dancing. More bubbles. It means another, and now, a bigger party. I learned something this week about the party at the end of the story of the forgiving father and lost sons. I learned that the party the father ordered when his son returned was more than a celebration of his homecoming. It was necessary. It was necessary to repair the damage caused by the son to the whole community, to his neighbors who would have regarded his behavior as a dangerous insult to traditional values and a terrible example. The banquet served to ease the younger son back into community. So, parties are necessary.

I am not suggesting that every relationship that needs repair can be repaired with a party. I am not suggesting that one party can make someone who has felt like an outsider suddenly believe they have found a safe place to belong. And I am not suggesting that you are obligated to attend every party to which you are invited. What I'm saying is that love and inclusion are worth celebrating. And they are worth giving up everything for. If we learn nothing from this journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, we have to learn that. Because we know how this journey ends. Jesus is killed, but his message isn't. His first followers will live to tell the stories and celebrate what love can do. And so will we. Amen.