**Lost**

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**Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

This story is the third in a set of three familiar parables. Each tells a story about something that once was lost and then was found.

The first one tells a story about a single sheep whose shepherd left the other ninety-nine in the pasture to search for him. Upon finding the wayward sheep, the shepherd rejoices. It must have seemed like such an odd story to the agrarian community that heard it. A wise shepherd doesn’t leave his flock wide open to become a lamb chop dinner for a hungry wolf like that. But the Good Shepherd will always search for each one of us when we are lost and alone.

The second one is the story of a lost coin. A woman who searches everywhere for the single lost coin and upon finding it, throws a party that probably cost more than the coin she found. I’m sure the listeners were wondering about the wisdom of this extravagance, but such is God’s love for us that God would rejoice so thoroughly when one of God’s children is found.

These stories remind us of God’s grace for each of us. In our imperfection, we all experience moments of being lost. I wonder when you have felt like the lost thing…that moment when hope was lost, when faith wavered, when love seemed far away. Let your mind and body remember…what did it feel like to be found? How did that grace appear to lead you home?

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And then there’s this story, the longest of the three, the story of a lost son and brother.

There is a man. He has a huge agricultural operation with sheep, goats, and cows. He’s got a bunch of hired hands, and he provides well for them. They have what they need and more to spare. And he has two sons he adores.

The older son is a hard worker. Dependable. Always ready to lend a hand. He follows the rules, learns the trade, can be trusted with any task his father needs him to do. He is careful, methodical, a perfectionist. He will always be at his father’s right hand.

The younger one is a dreamer. He has big ideas. Maybe a little flighty and harder to pin down. He has dreams of going to the big city. Of traveling the world. He doesn’t intend to get stuck on the farm, stuck in this small town, stuck in the family business. So, he shows up one morning and asks for his inheritance now. His dad agrees.

The older brother watches as his dad divides up the property. He watches his little brother pack his bags and kiss their tearful mother goodbye.

He rolls his eyes because this is typical. The little one always seems to get away with this foolishness while he picks up the slack.

Then he goes back to work. Because he’s dependable.

The father has lost his son. He is heartbroken.

The brother has lost his sibling. He is resentful.

The younger son doesn’t mind his money well. Away from the watchful eye of his parents and in the midst of a world of temptation, he squanders his money. He lives in wild and reckless ways.

He lacks restraint. The Greek word means “no salvation.” He lives in a manner that is extravagant and shows little regard for consequences. He doesn’t plan ahead. He’s impulsive. He has no sense of self-preservation. He lacks both financial and moral responsibility. He is lost.

Our translation calls it dissolute living. Jesus doesn’t fill in the details here. We do that on our own. I wonder what thoughts come to mind when you picture him? Who are the ones who live like him today…engaging in dissolute living? Take a moment and picture them in your mind. Who is the one you judge as immoral or irresponsible? Who has ruined their life or is unworthy of inclusion because of mismanagement, wrong thinking, and immorality?

Perhaps you thought of the lawbreaker, the prisoner. The drug addicts. The unhoused who can’t keep a job. The poor who can’t manage their money. The dropout who didn’t work hard enough. The unwed mother. The misfit we don’t understand.

Or maybe your mind wandered to the powerful who abuse those they serve. The rich man who hoards resources while others starve. The spoiled kid that runs out of money and runs back home. These are the sinners that Jesus should never include, right?

Maybe the kid wasted his money on wine and women. Maybe he paid for penthouse suites and extravagant parties. Maybe he bought the fancy cars and gambled the money away.

Or perhaps he got himself into trouble with drugs and alcohol and lost his way. Or his lifestyle rubs people the wrong way. Perhaps a business risk didn’t pay off. We don’t know and the specifics don’t really matter.

The thing is , the kid thought he had it under control. He was living life, finding love, taking chances, making something of himself. And the famine brought him to his knees. Scrambling just to make it, too proud to beg, he took the only job he could find, feeding the pigs. And, to add insult to injury, the pigs ate better than he did.

No one reached out to help such a wicked and wasteful man.

He was lost. To the world. To his family. Even to himself.

And then it tells us that he came to himself. It would be easy to listen to the world and lose hope. It would be easy to feel as if there was no solution. But he remembered himself. And he remembered his dad. His dad, who treated his workers well. Maybe his dad would give him a job. So, he set off toward home.

Here’s the amazing thing. His dad looked for him each day. There were no cellphones, no email, no way for him to know what had become of his son. Or if he was even still alive. But he looked for him each day, hoping that that piece of his heart that had walked away would come back home. Can you imagine the father’s joy when he saw his son come home?

He ran to meet him. He threw his arms around him. He scarcely heard the son’s apology because he was already setting in motion the welcome back party he had been planning since the day his son had left. Robes, rings, fatted calves, the whole kit-and-kaboodle. The lost has been found!

We would like the story to end here. It would put it in line with those first two parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin. The lost son has returned, and the party is in full swing. We could pick up the mantle of the lost son and know that no matter how much we mess up, no matter how much the world refuses to love us, God is waiting to rejoice when we come home. God invites us back with amazing grace.

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But the story isn’t over. Something is still lost. A relationship is still torn asunder.

The older son was working, as usual. At the end of the day, he comes home to music, dancing, a party in full swing. No one had told him. No one had come to get him. This party started without him. No one even seemed to notice he wasn’t there. And he was angry that all this would be done for that prodigal son.

The older son doesn’t want to have anything to do with this. This is the last straw. He can’t forgive this. It was his brother’s own fault and he doesn’t deserve to be forgiven. He doesn’t deserve such treatment. He doesn’t deserve a second chance. He wasn’t the good and dependable one. He was wasteful and wicked. It isn’t fair. He is angry.

But here’s the amazing thing. The father knew what time his son came home. Remember, he’s dependable. And the father was watching and waiting for him too. And when he didn’t come in at the appointed hour, the father left the celebration and searched for his lost son. He needed both his sons. This party wasn’t for one person. It was for a family that could once again be made whole. The father invites his son to join in welcoming his lost sibling home.

We don’t know what happened next. Jesus doesn’t tell us whether the son accepted that invitation or if he just walked away.

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I wonder if that’s because it’s our invitation too. Perhaps are to take up the mantle of the older son, being a partner in grace with God, forgiving and welcoming home our siblings in Christ we judge so harshly.

Imagine. The brother takes his father’s hand and goes inside to see his brother again. Seeing him there, the shared experiences of childhood rush back. He listens with wonder at the adventures, laughing and crying as the story is told. The younger one, wiser and calmer now, begins to rely on the older one, learning about farm life, not as a servant but as an apprentice. Together, a new creation, a new way of living as family.

Remember the one you were thinking about? What would it take for you to welcome them in, to hear their story, to forgive, to reconcile, to start again as a new and healed creation? I wonder how the world would be if we accepted God’s invitation to be agents of God’s grace?

As disciples, we trust that God seeks us when we wander, when we are lost. But do we rejoice when the prodigal are invited home too? Do we rejoice when God welcomes in the one we have labeled as unworthy and unholy? Jesus told these parables in response to the ones who grumbled that he ate with sinners.

As children of God, we are all siblings with one another. And, like all siblings, we struggle to get along sometimes. We compare ourselves and compete for the approval of our heavenly parent, as if we are fearful that God’s love will run out. We hurt each other with our actions and our inactions. And we often come up far short of perfection. But God invites us to forgiveness, for ourselves, seeking reconciliation with God, and for each other, seeking reconciliation with the family of God.

God invites us all to the great big party. God runs to meet us when we have been gone far too long and God invites us to be fully involved in the building of the kin-dom party when we are close at hand. What amazing grace. Amen.