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**Lost and Found**      Luke 4:16-22; 15:1-32  
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“And Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons.  
And the younger of them said to his father,  
‘Father, give me the share of your property that will belong to me.’  
And he divided his property between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living.  
And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country.  
And he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed the pigs.  
And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the pigs ate.  
And no one gave him anything.

When he came to himself he said, *‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!  
I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him,  
“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;  
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.  
Treat me like one of your hired servants.”’*

And he arose and came to his father.  
But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; and ran and embraced him and kissed him.  
And the son said to him, ***‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;  
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’***

But the father said to his servants, *‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him;*

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*and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, and get the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.*

***For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!***

And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field.

And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

He called one of the servants and asked what was going on.

And he replied, *'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him safe and sound.'*

But he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him.

But he answered his father, *'Listen! For these many years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command.*

*Yet you never gave me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when **this son of yours** came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fattened calf for him!'*

Then the father said to him, *'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because*

***your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found.'*** " Luke 15:11-32

This is one of Jesus' most familiar parables. The focus of the story is the father, "There was a man who had two sons." All three of the parables in Luke 15 illustrate ways of breaking relationships; by carelessness, by accident, or most severely by choice. It is sad when a relationship between two people is broken – whether husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, or parents and children. The picture of a missing child like in the parable tugs at our heart. Perhaps the only thing sadder than a child who is missing and can't come home, is a having a child choose to leave and *refuse* to come home. There are families in our congregation who have experienced or are experiencing the pain of a

child who chooses not to be in relationship with her or his parents or who are prodigals and it hurts a lot.

The father in the parable doesn't go out and search like the shepherd seeking the lost sheep or the woman searching for the coin she lost. Human beings have their own will and make our own choices and bear the consequences for good or ill of those decisions. Unfortunately the consequences of our sins always impact other people, especially those who love us. It is a terribly helpless feeling to watch someone we love making self-destructive choices that we are powerless to prevent. The father can only wait with longing, love, and prayer for his son who has chosen to leave to choose to return. We cannot even imagine the heartache of God who has millions of children who refuse to come home.

In the parable, the father had two sons, loved two sons, and took the initiative and went out to two sons (verses 20, 28), and was generous to two sons (12, 22, 31). In his love, the father is an image of God. The story begins with the younger son asking his father for the share of his property that will belong to him. This is like a son saying to his father, *"I wish you were dead so I could have my share of your money."* According to Jewish custom, a younger son received one third of the inheritance (half of what the older brother got) which was usually received at the time of death but which had been divided earlier. Those who first heard Jesus tell this story most likely would have expected the father to give the son a swift kick in the..., they would have expected the father to throw the son out of the house in anger.

Yet the father accepts the hurt of this emotionally shocking request and generously gives the younger son his share even though he is under no obligation to do so. We may criticize the father at this point for being overindulgent. We wouldn't make that mistake, would we? We might respond by putting a bumper sticker on our chariot that said, *"I'm spending my children's inheritance."* We might tell a child to go clean his room and forget it. Maybe we'd say, "No way, how can you be so selfish? You'll blow my hard earned money." Inside we could fear that he will waste whatever is given and then be back on our doorstep worse than before. It is hard to say no to a member of your family.

The younger son's request is an expression of someone who wants to live independent from God – *"Give it all to me now and I'll take care of myself, I'll control my own life."* He wants it all up front rather than one day at a time. This is the opposite of what we ask for in the Lord's Prayer when we say, *"Give us this day our daily bread."*

The son's attitude seems incredibly selfish and rude, yet we have to be careful that we don't take a similar approach to all that God has blessed us with materially; that we don't say, *"Give it all to me now, God, and I'll take care of myself, I'll control my own life."* If we're not careful we can become more interested in the gift than the Giver.

Not many days after much was put at his disposal the son gathers it up and heads away, but we know his heart had already left home and his father a while ago. According to Jewish custom, even though the son had been given his inheritance he only has the right of possession, but not to use or dispose of the property. The defection of our heart always precedes the defection that is observed outwardly in life. There is no need to spend a lot of time imagining how he squandered what he had. He thought he could take care of himself and in no time he was left broke and alone. He endures the ultimate indignation for a religious Jew, the only job he could find was feeding pigs which were, for obvious reasons, were considered unclean. Associating with the pigs made the younger son unclean and unable to practice his religion in any way. It is hard for us to feel the degree of revulsion this description had for Jesus' listeners. **The younger son sinks so low to show that no matter how far one departs from God, it is still possible to return and come home.**

Meanwhile the father is at home, trying to carry on as best he can with a broken heart, his son never far from his thoughts. In verse 17 we're told the young man "comes to himself" and recognizes that he has sinned against God and his father. He is feeling guilty, as he should. Wallowing in guilt, like rolling around in the mud of the pigsty is no way to get clean. Guilt is good if it leads us to repentance, if it leads us to change our behavior. The son decides he will return home with a prepared confession speech, ***"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.***

*Treat me like one of your hired servants."* He is resigned to a future as a servant in the home where he had once been a son. Going home such a miserable failure is utterly humiliating and to give up one's name (I am no longer worth to be called your son) is to lose everything.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion (the Greek word, "splagnizomai," literally means "to turn over the bowels, to have pity, or compassion"). Not only are his insides flipping all over at the sight of his son, but the father runs and embraces and kisses him. This may be the one of the only places in the Bible where God is portrayed as running. No father in the experience of Jesus' listeners

would have greeted a delinquent son in this way. It simply wasn't done. It is an exaggeration of affection beyond belief. But the Lord runs out to meet all those who, like the younger son, are willing to return to the responsibilities and privileges of being God's sons and daughters. The father runs out and welcomes his son with love BEFORE he heard his confession.

The father's homecoming celebration seems even more out of proportion given his son's behavior. The father gives a robe and a ring as signs of belonging and authority, shoes were the sign of a free man rather than a slave, and killing the fatted calf rather than a goat or a lamb signifies this is a major celebration such as would happen for the marriage of an eldest son, a visit by the governor, or some other grand occasion. The son is treated as a guest of honor.

When the older brother hears music and dancing, he doesn't drop what he's doing and go in to the house at once figuring that when his father throws a big party there must be good reason to celebrate. Instead he calls a servant and asks for an explanation. This is our first clue that the older brother has some issues of his own. Can you picture an alternative ending to this parable if it was the older brother who greeted his younger sibling first rather than the father? Do you think there would have been an embrace, a kiss, a robe, a ring, new shoes and a party?

The older brother is like the man who went to get his driver's license renewed. The local Registry of Motor Vehicles was packed. The line inched along for almost an hour until the man finally got his new license. He inspected his photo for a moment and commented to the woman behind the counter, *"I was standing in line for so long I ended up looking pretty grouchy in this picture."*

The woman looked at his picture closely. *"It's okay,"* she reassured the man, *"That's how you're going to look when the police pull you over anyway."*

What kind of reception would you want to receive if you felt guilty and were truly repentant – would you want to greet grace (the father) or a grouch (the older brother). The father is filled with joy, the older brother is angry.

The father has compassion, the older brother has criticism.

The father goes out to the brother, who refuses to come in; who can't even say, *"My brother,"* but only **"this son of yours."** He sounds like the parent who says when something goes well, *"That's my son."* When the kid misbehaves the same parent says, *"Nothing like that ever happened on my side of the family."*

The older brother assumes the worst about his brother, since he hasn't even spoken to him or seen him so he can't know what kind of shape he is in yet he says, *"This son of yours who has devoured your property with prostitutes."* Often our assumptions about other people say more about us than they do about them.

There are some of us who relate to the younger brother –we've made mistakes and have confessed them and sincerely turned from them and are seeking to live differently. Others of us relate more to the older brother. We're offended by the celebration and music and dancing. The return of this self-centered, lazy, foolish, irresponsible clod isn't the occasion for a party. Like the older brother, we will allow the younger son to return home. Judaism and Christianity both have clear provisions for the restoration of a penitent person. But a banquet with music and dancing? No there should be some consequences.

Let him come home to bread and water, not the fatted calf.

Let him wear sackcloth for a while to show how sorry he is, not a new robe.

Let him even put on some ashes, don't trust him with a new ring so soon.

Let him come in tears, not in merriment; kneeling and not dancing.

Older brothers wonder if the celebration is an indication that the father isn't taking sin seriously enough; that he's not considering the cost of disobedience and repentance.

What is the older brother's problem? Remembering that the father in the story represents God, the older brother is more interested in getting something from God, than enjoying being with God. Instead of feeling that time with his father was his reward (and something the younger brother totally missed out on that can't be replaced), he pleads that that because he was home with his dad he deserves some other additional reward. The older brother was not enjoying his father's presence because just like his brother he saw the relationship as a way of getting something rather than as the only thing worth having.

It's kind of like people who don't seek a or pursue a daily relationship with God on earth, yet who look forward to getting to heaven. The reward says the father to his first born is that you are WITH me, and all that is mine is yours. How sad it is when people realize too late that relationships are the most significant part of life. A relationship with God and with the people around us. The father's embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older son; Jesus' love for tax collectors and sinners doesn't negate Jesus' love for those who are Pharisees and scribes. The

world we live in tends to be a winners and losers, either/or kind of place, but God's love is both/and.

Some of us Christians are like the older brother. We are offended by God's grace to those we don't think deserve it. Some of us are like the younger brother, we have sinned against God and the people around us. We have chosen to walk away from a relationship with God while wanting to use all that God has given us merely for ourselves.

Even though this parable in Luke is directed to the church, we still don't get it when we call it the parable of the prodigal son. That title is putting the focus on judging someone in their sin, rather than celebrating God's love, forgiveness, generosity and grace for younger and older sons alike.

Jesus told this powerful parable because he was being criticized for welcoming people who needed the love and forgiveness of God. The difficulty is so many religious people don't want to associate with and don't want the church to associate with precisely the kind of people for whom Jesus came. Jesus welcomes and eats with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners of his time and our time, who else would we have them listen to and eat with? Is there anyone else who can transform lives?

For those of us like the younger son, the parable is an invitation to repent, to recognize the loss and emptiness of living apart from the God who gave us our life and who loves us like a devoted parent. We are invited to come home to a relationship with a loving God.

For those of us like the older son, the parable reveals whether our heart is truly with our Father or whether we are physically at home while our heart is somewhere else.

For those of us like the Father, who have a prodigal in our own family, the story teaches us the difficult truth that we can't control another person and that there is little possibility of change in someone's life who doesn't see the need for it or who doesn't wholeheartedly desire it. As parents, like the father in Luke 15, you pray, hope, watch, and wait, that your son or daughter comes to his senses before it is too late. It is a heartbreaking place to be as some of us unfortunately know too well.

The parable presents two attitudes, two ways of responding toward those who have wandered and want to come home. The joy of the dead being alive, and the lost being found is both the heart of the gospel of Jesus and the offense of the gospel. Celebrating the recovery of a lost sheep or coin, no problem, we always like to get our property back. But throwing a party for a child who has been as selfish and thoughtless

as this kid, no way. Wouldn't it be better for the prodigal, a better witness to the neighbors, and a better demonstration of the holiness of God if he were "taught a lesson he'd never forget." Older brother Christians tend to think so, but God does not.

When we get right down to it, the difficulty we have with the love, generosity, and mercy of the Lord is that God is generous to people who don't deserve generosity and, the Lord desires that we relate to others with the same graciousness. Whether we identify more with the younger or older son, the truth is God has been generous with us to a fault, just like the father in the parable.

This is the story of a loving Father who grace offends our sense of fairness, whose generosity and forgiveness come across as condoning. The father makes it clear twice (24, 32) that the younger son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. That is why we celebrate.

The paradox at the end of the parable is that the younger son is seated at the banquet forgiven and included in the family. The older brother by his own choice, is sitting outside the banquet, outraged at the perceived injustice he has suffered, alienated from his family. The story begins with us feeling alienated from the younger son and sympathy for the older son, and it ends with those feelings reversed. Jesus continually teaches the relationship between forgiving others and possibility of receiving forgiveness oneself. There is no possibility of receiving forgiveness without also giving it. The older brother is unwilling to forgive his brother so he ends up on the outside looking in on the party. Condemnation is catching, when we condemn others, we condemn ourselves. If we have been forgiven, we must forgive.

The parable concludes in the silence that follows the father's plea, "*But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because **your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found.***"', the question is, how will we complete the parable?

God wants us to join the celebration of repentance and the granting of forgiveness.

When have you found it difficult to forgive someone else?

In what ways are you in need of forgiveness?

Whom do you need to forgive?