

What are you looking for?

Luke 15

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Lesson from Luke 15 is part of the Anthem “Lead Me Back”

A certain man had two sons: And one said to his father, “Give me my share of the estate.” So he divided his property between them. And not many days after the son took a journey into a far country, and there wasted his wealth with wild living. And when he had spent it all, there was a mighty famine in the land; and he began to be in want.

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 arise and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against you and against heaven, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son: make me as one of your hired servants.”

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and against you. I am no more worthy to be called your son.”

But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”

What are you looking for?

If we need a story to illustrate the lesson from Luke 13 last week about waste and the gardeners in our lives, it probably is this one.

The younger son takes his share of his family's estate and "wasted his wealth in wild living."

Meanwhile, the father is out on the road scanning the horizon for some sign that his son will find his way home. And when, amazingly, he sees his son walking down that long road home, he goes running to meet him. And the son says "Look, I'm not worthy to be a son, let me be one of your servants."

But the father in this story is one of those gardeners – somebody who cultivates another chance. And he calls his servants to bring a robe and a ring and shoes and to get a party going because this reunion isn't a chance at being a good servant. It's another chance at being a son.

"When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment," Dr. King says, "we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance."

Now over the years of talking about this story, I've discovered that it is dangerous. It hits a little close to home. You can't tell this story without running headlong into everyone's family dynamics.

Talking about this story has been the occasion of hearing family stories from people who are grieving the lost ones who have never yet come home and stories from those who have realized they can never go home again.

I've heard heart-wrenching stories about families torn apart because resources were wasted by some member of the family leaving parents or siblings or children destitute. And I've heard stories about people who lost everything in failed attempts to save someone they love.

I have heard stories about those for whom their prodigality is always someone else's fault and stories about prodigals who never meant to be prodigals at all but simply had to leave home to find their own way.

I hear from older sisters and brothers who resent this story because it seems to unfairly characterize their work as responsible contributors to our life together.

I think how you read or hear the story has everything to do with what you are looking for.

In the various stages of my life, I've read it as an older brother looking for some kind of recognition. When I was coming to terms with the truth of my own life, I read it as the prodigal who was never supposed to be one looking to find my way home again. As a pastor, I've read it as someone who finds himself scanning the horizon for signs of those who are trying to find their way home again -- and responding to those who aren't so happy when they arrive.

If you are looking for fairness, you will read the story one way. If you are looking for forgiveness, you will read it another.

If you are looking for responsibility, you will read it one way. If you are looking for redemption, you will read it another.

If you are looking for people to get what they deserve, you will read it one way. If you are looking for grace, you will read it another.

Maybe it helps know that the context of this story is that all the tax collectors and sinners are coming to listen to Jesus and the religious leaders – those Pharisees I mentioned a couple weeks ago into whose image I have been trained to become – were grumbling and saying: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So Jesus tells this sequence of three stories ...

About a shepherd who has a hundred sheep but loses one and goes looking for it. And when it is found, he goes home and invites his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him.

About a woman who has ten coins but loses one and she cleans the whole house looking for it and when it is found she calls together her friends and neighbors to celebrate with her.

And then this story about a father and two sons. And the thing to point out here is that there is a difference in consciousness in these three stories -- the sheep may only be partially aware that it is lost; the coin is clueless that it is lost; but this younger son made a conscious decision to leave.

I'm already showing my older brother hand.

So when this younger son finds his way home and his father throws a party for him, I get it that the older brother refuses to celebrate. This isn't about a lost sheep or a lost coin. This is about someone willingly going off on some adventure that eventually bankrupts him. "If that worthless, wanton little brother of mine is in the house, I'm not going home," he says.

The warning seems to be that if it is fairness the older brother is looking for, he may never see his family again.

It's been interesting to me, this time around with the story, that there is a parallel between the return of the younger son and the older brother. It's true that they come from different directions – one from what appears to be a wasted life and the other from a life of work. But they are both headed home.

And even though one is welcomed and the other refuses to go home, the father goes out to meet both of them.

And, in the end, the older brother is claiming exactly what the younger one offers his father – not to be a son but a servant: “I have been working like a slave for you all these years,” the older brother says, as if that is what really is at stake.

And the father says to him, “Son ... Son, you have always been with me.”

In other words both of these children have somehow gotten confused about what it is they are looking for and why it is that they are going home. They have confused being a good servant with being a son. They have confused what they have done with who they are.

What these children – and that sheep and that coin – have in common is that they are all of value whether any of them are conscious of it or not. Being lost doesn't change the intrinsic value of any of them. The father is still looking for them and goes out to meet them and still celebrates them.

During the holidays, Joyful Noise, one of the community singing groups that meets here, sang an arrangement of Kenny Loggins' “Celebrate me Home,” written after Loggins and Jim Messina had gone their separate ways. I sat there stunned for a minute because I thought of this story and the father and looking for the kind of celebration that would bring people home.

When I heard it, I realized that it was one of the things I'm looking for. It's one of the things I'm looking for in our life together.

I was at the Diverse Harmony fundraiser last night. Diverse Harmony is the country's first queer-straight alliance chorus that has met here at Seattle First Baptist for 14 years. There are now 82 singers, Patrick tells me, ages 13-23. It has been supported by our congregation generally and some of you individually for many of those years.

A young woman got up last night to talk about what this organization means to her and she talked about how difficult her life had been in Junior High and High School – the bullying, the self-doubt, the self-harm she got lost in, and serious questions about whether she wanted to go on living or not.

And then, she said, “I walked into Seattle First Baptist Church on a Tuesday night and I discovered this group ... and it saved my life.” She is 20 now. She finished college and is headed to graduate school.

And I know. Not every story is like this one – at least not yet. But I want to celebrate this story and this young woman because, I think, it says something about who we want to be and, in fact however imperfectly, who we are.

I want to celebrate that, deep in Lent, we are already looking for signs of resurrection. Perhaps you noticed as Linda read this story that the younger son said, “I will *arise* and go to my father.” And then the story says, “And he *arose*, and came to his father.” And if you wonder if this has anything to do with Luke’s understanding of resurrection, the story clears it up when the father says, “We have to celebrate because this my son was *dead and is alive again.*”

We have to celebrate this morning because this young woman – this daughter – was drawn toward death but she is alive again!

I have read this story a lot of ways over the years. And it occurs to me this morning that how I read it or how I hear it has everything to do with what I am looking for.

What are you looking for this morning?

It’s probably not as easy as saying that we want fairness *or* forgiveness; responsibility *or* redemption; getting what you deserve *or* grace.

Wherever we are on our journey, has a lot to do with what we are looking for right now.

But I want to believe that, along the way, there is someone just waiting to celebrate us home. “Someone,” as Dr. King says, “who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance” to come home.

And today, if you hear that voice calling you home, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The sermon that includes “another chance” is “A tough mind and a tender heart,” in the collection of sermon, *Strength to Love*, (Fortress Press, 1963), p.20.