

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 27, 2022

Are you home?

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Yay! A Sunday where I get to complain! What am I complaining about? The Revised Common Lectionary! I simply do not understand why on earth we get the parable of the prodigal son here in Lent 4, but the introductory parables about the lost sheep and coin don't come until the end of the summer. These three parables are intimately related, they share a similar structure and language, and they are clearly intended to reinforce each other; they belong **together!**

So, just a quick reminder! You heard the first few verses of Luke 15, which gives us the setting and audience hearing these parables: the tax collectors and sinners as well as the grumbling Pharisees. Then Jesus relates two parables that share the exact same literary structure, along with very similar language. The first parable is about a lost sheep and a shepherd who leaves the 99 to go find the lost one in the wilderness. The second parable is about a lost coin and the woman who turns her house upside down to find it. In both parables there is much rejoicing when what was lost is found.

Now, while these two parables are very similar to one another, I believe it is in the only **major** difference between the two that Jesus' point is really being made. And it is that difference that is preparing us for the third parable, the one I read just a few moments ago. That difference has to do with what is lost and how it may have been lost.

In the first parable we have a lost sheep. Sheep aren't the brightest creatures and can be prone to wandering off from the flock in search of food or water or what have you. In the second parable we have a lost coin; unlike the sheep, coins are inanimate objects and completely unable to wander off on their own (although it can sure feel as though my keys wander off sometimes). Why is that difference important? I believe it highlights the different sorts of "lost-ness" we can find ourselves in. Sometimes we are lost through our own

actions, wandering off to find...something. And sometimes we are lost in place, somehow at "home" and yet not where we are supposed to be, at home yet not really.

Perhaps you can see now where I am going with this. These introductory parables are preparing us for the third parable, the prodigal son. Although I would like to suggest a different title. Let's call it the parable of the two lost sons, because, of course, both of them are lost! One is lost like the sheep, wandering off far from home; and the other is lost like the coin, still home but not really.

This begs the question, then, where is home for the sheep and the coin? Where is home for these two lost sons? Where is **your** home? What defines home for a sheep? Or a coin? Or a wastrel? Or a stickler? What defines home for you? Perhaps the best question to throw all of this into clarity is this: where are you when you're **NOT** lost? Where are you when you feel as though you belong completely?

A sheep is not lost when they are in the flock, under the care of a shepherd. A coin belongs when it is where its owner wants it to be. Those are easy answers, it gets harder in the third parable because the sons can conceptualize and pursue their own "home" in a way coins and sheep cannot. So, a wastrel would think that their home is wherever they are surrounded by friends and food and drink. A stickler would think that their home is where they know and can follow the rules. But all of that is wrong, wrong, wrong.

The point of this parable, the point of all three of these parables is the same. The variety of "lost-ness" expressed in them may be different, but where we are lost **from**...that's the same. We're lost from our true home. Where's that? Well, I believe that our truest home is wherever we are when we are resting in God. Whether sheep, coin, wastrel, or stickler, home is the tender embrace of a loving and gracious God. Ultimately, we are lost when we are not resting in God. And wow are we good at getting lost!

We get lost looking for things that don't satisfy, food, fun, wealth, power, popularity. We get lost trying to live up to rules and standards that we (largely) inflict on ourselves. We get lost in comparing and judging. We get lost in doing everything for everyone. We get lost in ever greater achievements. We get lost in our emotions. We get lost in sterile objectivity. We get lost in our anxieties and fears. We get lost in pursuing the latest shiny

objects. We get lost in trying to prove ourselves to others. We get lost in pleasing people. We get lost in envying the “home” others seem to find. See, we’re experts at getting lost; we’re pros at leaving the presence of God, that warm embrace which is our surest rest. We have found a multitude of ways to get away from God, sometimes wandering off, and sometimes standing still. We can even turn the gifts of God in to ways to get lost from God’s presence.

There is an old Jewish story that goes like this: “The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and his neighbor had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling envious and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.”¹

What if I told you, you don’t need to be lost any more? Could you believe that? I mean, **really** believe it? Could you dare to believe that you don’t have to wander off in search of home? Could you believe that you don’t have to be a stickler for some set of rules that too easily become substitutes for God’s presence? Could you believe that you need not **do** a single thing to be welcomed home to God’s embrace?

The fact of the matter is this: anywhere that is not God is not our home. So, my siblings in Christ, let’s go home. Let’s turn to God, trusting that God forgives even before we can finish our confession. Let’s turn to God, trusting that how we got lost, or where we wandered off to are irrelevant to God. Let’s turn to God trusting that all God cares about is that we are home **now**. And when we wander off again, or get lost standing still; God rushes to embrace us in the most undignified, joyous, exuberant and prodigal manner...again and again and again! What good news!

Do you think there might be one or two others in the world that could use some directions on how to get home? Do you think you could show them the way to their true home? I think we can! I think we do that by being loving and

¹ R. Alan Culpepper. Luke 15:1-32, Parables of the Joy of Recovery and Return. (1995). In *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume IX: The Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of John* (p. 298). Abingdon Press.

accepting people, just as God loves and accepts them. I think we do that by wrapping others in that same loving embrace which we know as our home too. So, let's walk the Way of Christ, knowing that it will take us, and all people, home. Let's walk the Way of Christ, straight into the tender and loving embrace of God. Amen.