

How far can you go til you're completely lost?

Hold on to that question while we look at this story we know so well.

Today, Luke gives us the culmination of the parables of lostness in the story of the prodigal son - that ungracious young man who asks for his father's money, his share of the inheritance, only to spend it all and hit rock bottom.

These stories of lostness are set within the season of Lent because they are, in part, a call to repentance and return. They end with the joy God has in finding the one who was lost - the sheep that strays from the flock until the shepherd finds it and places it over his shoulders to carry it home, and the coin diligently, desperately looked for under every nook and cranny of the house until the woman finds it.

So often in my preaching on this text from Luke I have focussed on the brother that comes home - the brother who basically demands his father sell a portion of his land to give him his inheritance; the brother who basically says to all effect to his father "you are dead to me"; the brother who squanders it all and finds himself in an untenable situation as famine strikes the land and who is reduced to working with pigs and wanting to eat the pigs' oats because he is so hungry.

I have previously focussed on his return as he "comes to himself" and realizes what he might have if he returns to his father's house, knowing he might not be wholeheartedly welcomed back after what he has done and willing to return there as a mere hired hand, prepared speech and all.

I have, at other times, shone the spotlight on the older brother. That older brother who has never asked for a thing, who has done what his father required of him, who stewes over the fact that his younger brother returns and is restored as an heir - with robe and ring and sandals - and adding

insult to injury - is thrown a lavish party with the best food. His father pleads with his eldest to join the party but he is too bitter, too angry to hear his father's words thinking perhaps that he is loved less or thought of less, distancing himself from "that son of yours" and his family.

Both of those brothers are good to look at, good to shine the spotlight on, because they really are us.

In any given time in our lives we have made self-serving decisions, putting our own desires and wants first, sometimes to the detriment of our very being and often wounding those who love us the most.

In any given time in our lives we have sat self-righteous, happy in our own justification, or miserable in it, jealous that others get what we perceive to be undeserved and unmerited.

For this is what the parable does, at least in part - it holds up a mirror to who we are and how far we can stray or become lost from the source of our home, the source that knows us as we are, fully and completely. And in either of those cases, whether we are the brother who made an almost fatal mistake or whether we are the brother who feels rejected and angry, we completely end up missing the mark. And missing the party.

But the father doesn't miss the mark. The father sees both his children and doesn't miss a beat. Whether his youngest was truly repentant, truly sorry, or simply desperate to return home, doesn't even come into play in his mind.

We know that the youngest has a whole speech rehearsed for when he sees his father, whether it is sincere or not - we do not know. But the father doesn't even get to hear it, doesn't even seem to want to hear it. This is a father who has been waiting and watching, a father who has been longing and hoping for his son to return home. And then he sees him. Far off in the

distance he would recognize him anywhere, that walk, those shoulders, that hair. He knows it is him and doesn't need to watch and wait anymore. He runs. And in gratitude and love he pulls his boy into his arms and into his chest, holding him, kissing him.

His youngest still doesn't understand his father, the father who has always given him everything he has, and still wants to get out his speech, even after that joyful reunion. He gets out one rehearsed sentence and his father cuts him off: Get him dressed properly! Restore him to me and this family, he says to his servants. Go get a robe, a ring, and sandals! Then the father says, let's throw a party! We have no choice but to celebrate, he says to those who have gathered around the happy spectacle of father and son reunited. Because my son is home - I thought he was dead, but he's alive. He was lost, but now he's home.

How far can you go until you are completely lost? How far can you stray from home?

We can place ourselves in either of the boys' camp.

We might be the youngest, who is simply confused and grateful that he is home and truly welcomed home, not begrudgingly, and, who after being so desperately hungry is spread a feast. This is grace, we acknowledge, when we've been placed in the same circumstance. For who among us has never made so shameful a mistake that we were unsure of our welcome, unclear of our belonging?

We might be the oldest, who is also confused and resentful that having worked hard and done all the right things, isn't rewarded as his undeserving brother is. We might even hear the words the father says about coming to the party and not hear them applied to us because we want to stay in our anger, stay in our moral superiority. We don't hear and see that what the father is saying - that what has been his has always been

ours in the first place, forgetting that we have always been welcome and that we have always belonged.

The mirror held up in the parable shows who we are.

But if we look a little more closely, if we pay a little more attention, while focussing on ourselves we can see something else. God is reflected there too. Luke tells us in these parables of lostness that this God is a God of extravagant and prodigal and uneconomical grace. Grace that pulls us in to arms that will hold us fast. Grace that invites us in to celebrate life. Grace that keeps watch and waits for us and welcomes us home.

If, as Luke writes further in the book of Acts, that God is the one “in whom we live and move and have our very being,” then how can it be possible to be so far gone? How, even when we have made the most egregious of mistakes? How, even when our repentance is rehearsed? How, even when we grumble and complain? How, even when we refuse the invitation?

This grace, this father of the parable - the one who watches and waits, the one who welcomes and kisses, the one who restores and invites - is for us. Always for us. For you and for me and for all whose hearts are restless to return home. Medieval mystic St. John of the Cross wrote in his poem “Song of the Soul and the Bridegroom,” “When You regarded me, your eyes imprinted in me your grace; for this you loved me again...”

So long as we are longed for, we cannot be truly lost. So long as we are seen, we cannot be truly lost. This is the prodigal God. Thankfully, mercifully, this is the way of God’s grace.

Amen.