

The Lost Son

Luke 15: 11-32

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Of all the stories that Jesus told about lost things in the 15th chapter of Luke, this one is the longest, 21 verses as compared to seven for the lost sheep and only three for the lost coin. It is also the one which strikes closest to home. I became fully aware of that many years ago in my first full-time church in the foothills of North Carolina. A new family moved into the neighborhood and I went to their home and visited with them. They were a lovely family, a father and mother and two children, an older daughter and a younger son. They started attending our church and became members. Frequently, on Sunday afternoons we would gather at their home for a friendly game of touch football. Both parents were devout Christians and it showed in the way they related to their children and to be perfectly honest, the entire church family. Then one day, I received an urgent telephone call. Bill, the husband, said, "Pastor, our teenage daughter has run away. We don't know where she is but we think she may be headed for Charlotte, North Carolina. Would you come to our home?" I immediately stopped everything I was doing and drove to their home. We prayed together and then Bill and I hopped in his little Subaru and drove down the interstate to Charlotte. As you might guess, we didn't find her. In fact, she went missing for a long, long time. Mom and Dad faithfully attended services each Sunday, but I could tell they were hurting. On more than one occasion I saw a tear sliding down the cheek of Barbara during the service. They were in agony. It's never easy to be the parent of a lost son or daughter, and the same was true in the days of Jesus.

The people who were listening to Jesus could easily identify with the father in this story. Basically the youngest of two brothers goes to his father and asks to receive his portion of the inheritance ahead of time. In other words, "Dad, I don't want to wait until you die to receive my portion of our family's wealth. How about giving it to me right now!" Sounds a little callous doesn't it and it was. But sometimes in the ancient world a father who was getting up in age would disburse his possessions among his sons and retire from the affairs of the world. In the case of this father, the older son would receive two-thirds of the estate and the younger one a third. That was the law according to Deuteronomy 21:15-17. So the younger son received his third of the inheritance and promptly left the family farm. He moved to a distant country where life was easy and exciting. He wasted his inheritance in wild living and eventually found himself penniless, alone and a stranger in a foreign land. To make matters worse, a severe famine had befallen the country where he was now living. Unable to find employment, he ended up a swineherd, feeding another man's pigs. For a Jewish young man this represented the very depths of degradation. I'm sure he remembered what he had been taught as a child, "Cursed is he who feeds swine." Nevertheless, he was so hungry that he would have eagerly eaten the food set aside for the pigs, but no one gave him permission to do even that. He had sunken into the mire of absolute worthlessness.

Fortunately, however, this young man finally came to his senses and made a heartfelt decision. He realized that his foolish and impertinent behavior had nearly destroyed him. Humbled and genuinely repentant, he said to himself, "Here I am nearly starving to death and yet my father's servants have more than enough to eat. I will go home and say to my father, 'I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" Getting to his feet he began the long journey back home.

Every day, the young man's father had looked wistfully down the country lane that led to his farm. Perhaps, he thought, this will be the day when my son returns home. But each day was the same, no son. Then one afternoon he saw a ragged figure far off in the distance. Could it be? The man was stooped over and appeared to be almost at the point of collapse. But without a doubt the father knew that this distant apparition was indeed his son. He got to his feet and on aged legs ran to his son, embracing him and kissing him on both cheeks. Falling to his knees, his son said, "Father, I have sinned against you and against heaven. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." His father, however, would hear nothing of it. Turning to one of his servants he said, "Quick, bring one of our finest robes and put it on him, place the family ring on his finger, put new sandals on his feet and prepare a fatted calf for a celebratory dinner. For this my son was dead and is alive. He was lost and has been found." And so the festivities began.

Of course, as the story continues we learn that the elder brother was not so pleased to hear the good news of his brother's return. In fact, he had probably hoped that his younger, trouble making brother would never come back home. And now here he was and everyone was making over him. He was angry and hurt. He would have nothing to do with this festive homecoming. His reaction and what it signifies is a message for another day. So rather than delving into it, let us focus our attention on what the father said to this older brother, trying to convince him to join in the celebration. He exclaimed, "But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and has been found."

Now what does this beloved story have to say to you and me? Of course, it describes God's love for us, even when we go astray. But there are some other things that it tells us about our Father in heaven. Let me share them with you. First, God will let us run our own lives, even if we make a mess out of them. During my years of pastoral ministry, I've certainly seen that over and over again and so have you. For example, we've done our best to show our children the right way of life, but that doesn't mean they will heed our advice, or follow in our footsteps. The same is true with regards to God's children. The Lord instructed the ancient Israelites in the way that they should live with Him and with one another. As we all know from the Scriptures, that didn't always happen. In fact, it seems like it rarely happened. Saint Paul aptly described this wayward tendency in Romans 1:21-24. Speaking of humanity's propensity for rebellion and moral degeneracy, he said, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became

futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." Like the young man who left home and engaged in wild lifestyle in a distant land, God will let us go our own way. It breaks His heart but He knows that that's the way it has to be. He wants us to love and obey Him, not because we have to, but because we want to. He will not shackle our free will so that we are compelled to serve Him. He is not a divine dictator.

Here's the second thing that it tells us about our heavenly Father. He will not rescue us from our waywardness until we are truly repentant. The father in this story did not rescue his son. He did go to that foreign land and try to talk him into returning home. He did not send one of his servants to find the young man and if necessary buy his release from slopping the pigs. He was not an enabler and neither is our heavenly Father. He believes in tough love. He will not deliver us from our sins until we are truly ready to give them up, until we come to our senses and start on that long journey back home. Remember Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. The people who heard him were so convicted by what he said that they cried out, "What shall we do?" In response, Peter told them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). God is patiently waiting, standing on the doorstep of heaven, longing for that day, that moment when we repent and return home.

Finally, there is one more thing that this story tells us about our heavenly Father's love for us. He earnestly desires to forgive us when we go astray and to restore us into the fellowship of His family. What did the father in this story do when he saw his son far off in the distance? He ran to him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. He asked his servants to put the best robe on his shoulders, the family ring on his finger and a pair of new shoes on his feet. In other words, the young man was once again a full-fledged member of the family. Like this scene that Jesus so beautifully portrayed, when a sinner comes home, our heavenly Father is ready to embrace him and welcome him back into the family. Hear again these words from the letter of 1st John in the New Testament, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God" (1 John 3:1).

And just in case you're wondering what that means for our lives right here and now on good old planet earth, let me tell you about a young man who had been a student at the university where I attended. He was a gifted musician who played in a band that did gigs at local bars in downtown Richmond. As is so often the case, the music and drinking went hand in hand until one day he woke up in the back seat of his car covered in the remains of the past evenings excesses. That's when he came to his senses, stopped drinking, reunited with his family, accepted Christ as his savior and decided to re-enroll as a student at the university. He only had one problem. No money for tuition. One day his wife and son were buying groceries at a local supermarket. The store was hosting a raffle for a new car. The son, who was so proud of his dad and the change in his life said, "Mom, let's fill out the raffle ticket and stick it in the box. If we win, dad can sell the car and go to school." His mom

replied, "We never win anything, but if you say so, we'll give it a try. I know how much your dad wants to go back to school." They filled out the ticket and dropped it in the box. And guess who won the car and went back to school? God does have a way of putting shoes on our feet, a robe on our shoulders and a ring on our finger when we come to our senses and head back home.

Years ago, a young man just out of his teenage years decided to leave home. He was tired of the hardscrabble existence on the family farm. He didn't get along with his parents and he was always arguing with his brothers and sisters. "I've had it," he told them. "I'm leaving and I'm never coming back." He packed up what few belongings he possessed and headed down the road to a new future. Sure enough he found what he was looking for, lots of excitement in a big city not too far away. He acquired a new set of friends, even found a few odd jobs to keep his head above water. Things were on the up and up until a major financial depression took hold of the local economy. Things turned south in a hurry. There were no employment opportunities, even for part-time work. His friends disappeared and he found himself in a bread line waiting for whatever handouts were available. That's when he decided that life on the family farm wasn't so bad after all. At least there was food on the table and a place to lay down at night. He decided to write a letter. In the letter he said, "Mom and Dad, I'm sorry for all the mean things I said to you before I left home. Please forgive me. I want to come home. I'm going to catch a ride on the old train that runs by our home. If you want me to get off, just tie an old rag on the big tree in the front yard. If you don't, I'll understand. I've made a lot of mistakes and done some really stupid things." With the last few coins that he had to his name, he bought a ticket a week later and boarded the train that ran by his home. Along the way he struck up a conversation with the passenger sitting beside him. The closer he got the more nervous he became. Would there be a rag, a ribbon, anything at all tied to one of the branches? As the train chucked around the last curve, the young man couldn't stand it any longer. He turned to the man sitting beside him and said, "In just a moment this train will be going by an old farm house with a great big tree in the front yard. I can't stand to look, I'm just too scared, but if you see anything hanging on that tree would you please tell me?" The train slowly made its way around the curve, the young man squeezing his eyes together for fear of what he would or would not see. Then suddenly he was being shaken by two burly hands and a booming voice which declared, "Open your eyes young man. Take a look at that tree. It's covered in rags!"

I don't know if this story that I heard many years ago became the inspiration for that once popular song, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon around the Old Oak Tree." But whether it did or not, one thing is for sure. Our Father God has tied a great big red, blood stained ribbon on the Crucifixion Tree of Calvary and said to each and every one of us, "Come home!!"