

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Joshua 5:9-12  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon  
March 27, 2022

Today we get to spend time with an amazing story: the Prodigal Son. You can enter this story at any place, through any character, and receive a blessing. This story draws us in, we see ourselves in it -- and it reveals how God responds. With generous, extravagant love. That's actually what "prodigal" means -- extravagant, lavish, to the point of being wasteful. It's been suggested we should rename this story "God's prodigal love." We'll come back to that.

This morning I invite us to just get inside this story and move around in it. And as we do, let's keep in mind that it's a story about *being lost and being found*. We know because it's the third story Jesus tells about things lost and found -- all in Luke Chapter 15. Jesus first tells about a lost sheep, how the shepherd seeks and finds it. Then he tells of a lost coin, how the woman sweeps and cleans to find it. Then there is this story of a lost son -- really two lost sons.

We can enter the story anywhere, usually we start with the younger son. He rudely insults his father by demanding his inheritance, which in a traditional culture was like saying, *I wish you were dead!* It's surprising the father went along, but that's how the story goes, and off went this younger son with probably one-third of his father's estate -- fruit of his whole life's work, assets passed down through generations. And in no time this guy wasted it all on wild living. Recklessly. Extravagantly. Fed his appetites till it was all gone. Some people are like that. Headstrong. Rebellious. Self-centered. What they want, they want. Other people don't matter. They take advantage. They make costly mistakes, give in to cravings that eat up everything of value, chase after what's shiny but doesn't satisfy. And end up lost, in one pig sty or another. It is possible we might have made some costly mistakes ourselves, in our day. We might be the younger son.

Not everything was bad about him. He wanted independence, to follow his own dreams, be his own boss. He was a risk-taker, and maybe it could have worked out for him. That's an American take on the story, not at all true to customs in Jesus' day. But we can enter the story there, we understand that impulse.

And we realize it doesn't have to be intentional. Sometimes things just happen that leave people lost. Getting sick, losing a job, loved ones dying, you get betrayed by a spouse, have money trouble, fall into addiction, get blindsided by global pandemic... It's a big world and not safe. People do get lost. We get lost. And when dreams crumble and

things just don't work out, we can end up weeping in a pig sty, looking for a way to come crawling home.

Thank God the younger son – incredibly – had a father who welcomed him back with open arms and a lavish feast to celebrate “this son of mine was lost and now is found!”

The elder son was the steady, careful one. He didn't make big mistakes like his brother—in fact, he tried not to make any mistakes at all. He watched his step. He honored tradition. And *he resented every moment of it*. Was he always that way, or did he burn out on being good? After his brother left and all the chores fell to him, did he start ruminating on all the fun he could be having? Somehow he turned bitter and judgmental. And we do know this: resentment will eat you up. It will kill your spirit. It will rob your joy. Resentment keeps you focused on other people, comparing your lot with theirs, hating where you've ended up, and at the same time judging those who don't meet your standards. Stewing and fuming is no way to live. This is not the life God wants for us – following the rules but dying inside. It's another way people get lost. And a lot of people are lost in this place of rage and bitterness today.

We meet the elder son in the barnyard, sulking. And maybe he reminds us of times we've held onto grudges or complaints. Times we've nursed our hatred for those “other guys” who've got it all wrong. Or been disgusted with someone not pulling their own weight. Times we've taken for granted our own privilege. Assuming our good fortune was due to our own hard work, pulling up those bootstraps, forgetting how everything that comes is free gift from God's hand. Forgetting to be grateful. We might be staying faithfully at home, we might be dutifully doing our jobs, but if our hearts are petrified, then we really are lost.

Thank God the father was willing to leave that joyful feast and deliberately walk right into his elder son's rats-nest of anger and resentment -- because he was not willing to lose this son too. Patiently, lovingly he said: “Son, I am always with you, I share everything I have with you. Can't you find some way to share this joy?”

Let's do spend a moment with that father, walk around in his character a bit, because a lot of us are parents, and this might be our way into the story. This father led with his heart, and it cost him. It's possible he didn't have the strongest parenting boundaries in the world. Why *did* he give that young buck all that money? Didn't he know what would happen? It does seem the father took his hard-working son for granted. He got so giddy welcoming the wanderer, he forgot to even invite the older one till the party was well underway.

Parents aren't perfect. But every parent knows what it is to lose sleep worrying about their kids' welfare. To walk that line between giving guidance and granting independence. From the first day we drop them off for kindergarten, we realize our children have a life beyond our loving reach. Our best desires for them will always come up against the reality of their own free will. We raise them to make their own choices, but we can't guarantee what those choices will be.

It gets me thinking about how risky this enterprise is that God has gotten into with us. The risk is, God could lose us. But that's who God is. God's heart is passionate. God risks God's love on us.

One thing *is* perfect about the father's love – it is perfectly generous. The father loves both his sons infinitely. Excessively. Recklessly. Loves them to the point of it being wasteful. This is God's *prodigal* love for us. Lavish, extravagant, beautiful.

And the father cannot bear to see his sons estranged – because he knows this is exactly how family rifts get started. Foolish actions, long-simmering resentments. So when the elder one says “That *son of yours* squandered everything!” the father is quick to correct him: “This *brother of yours* was lost and has been found.” We are siblings in the Parent God's love. We belong to God and to each other -- like it or not!

Jesus told this story at a particular point in time, when the dutiful religious folks, who were sure they'd *always* followed *all* the rules, were outraged at Jesus forgiving and welcoming mistake-makers. Jesus wanted to bring all the siblings together – because God's prodigal love is for all of us, and we are meant for each other, like it or not! Siblings are meant to welcome siblings, because of the Parent's great love. I wonder what this means for us.

In this parable I see God looking at the whole human enterprise and observing all the ways we can get lost – and all the ways God finds us.

*When we are the younger sons...* God's love is just as risky as we are. God's love takes a chance on us. God's love grants us free will and helps us deal with the consequences when we choose foolishly. God's forgiveness is lavish, we always have a home to come back to, in relationship with God. We always have a chance to begin again.

*When we are the younger sons...* God's love lets us go, and welcomes us back. We will never know how much this costs our loving parent God.

*When we are the elder sons...* God's love partners with us in our responsible, necessary daily work. God's love accompanies us so steadily we might very well take it for granted. God has already given us everything – life and breath and food and clothing and shelter

– all that we have is God's and comes from God. We are richly blessed every single day, whether we know it or not.

*When we are the elder sons...* God's love shows us what a caring life is like, and when we grow tired of well-doing, God gentles and reaches out to us. Calls us to ease up and know grace, let go of fear and anger and worry and just rest in love.

*When we are the waiting parents...* God's heart yearns with us for every child who's wandering, whether our children or someone else's. God helps us keep the home fires burning.

*When we are the waiting parents...* God works to bring the family together. The whole human family. God bridges differences. God teaches us wisdom. God uses our influence to heal.

It would be nice to know how the story ended. Did the younger son ever get it together? Did the older son ever shake off his sulk? I think we realize we are meant to write the ending ourselves, as the Parent God's love influences our lives.

We do know that each of the lost and found stories ends with a party. A feast to celebrate a found sheep, a found coin, a found son -- or two.

A feast is a beautiful time out. A feast brings relief from the burdens of being good, or being foolish. The feast brings people together. To celebrate blessings, to celebrate life's gifts.

Like the feast of Holy Communion we share today. This sacramental feast is a foretaste, it is a moment of ritual unity in Christ's body, it is a sign of what can be – as we live together with our lavish Parent God.

Every seven days, on the Lord's Day, today, siblings around the earth share a meal of bread and wine. It's a symbol. No, it is more, it is a reality. We are mystically made one, at this moment in time, at this Communion table, across every time zone, through God's grace. For this Lord's Day, we are all made one in the Parent God who lavishes risky love on every child of earth. Our Parent God yearns for nothing less than a family united in love and peace and justice. May it be so. In Jesus' name. Amen.