

Lent 4
March 6, 2016

"The Lost Sons"

LUKE 15:1-3 AND 11-32

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "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! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Ahmud, a non practicing Muslim, told me that he wanted nothing to do with the Christian faith because Jesus welcomed a thief into paradise without asking him to do something to pay for his sins. So it was with the Pharisees and teachers of the law who criticized Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them. How could Jesus welcome these people and even forgive them of their sins without demanding that they do something to make up for what they had done wrong?

Jesus told three parables or stories to help these people see how important it was for him to reach out to lost sinners. He shocks us with the story of the shepherd who has a hundred sheep. He goes after the one lost sheep and searches for the one that was lost. That doesn't make sense does it? Why would you leave the ninety nine sheep all alone to go after the one that was lost? He shocks us with the story of a woman who loses a coin at night, lights a lamp and searches in the night with the light of a dim lamp until she finds the coin. Why not wait until the next morning when it is light and you can see? And he shocks us with the story of the father who welcomes his lost son home even after he had totally messed up his life. The loving father even deals gently with the older son who does not love his brother as much as the father does. Jesus wants us to be shocked and amazed at his love for people who are lost and his willingness to completely pardon those who come to him for forgiveness.

This morning we want to focus our attention on the lost sons, not one lost son but two lost sons. We want to see the father's love for these two lost sons because it illustrates Jesus love for those who are lost.

The first lost son

Jesus tells us that a man had two sons. The younger of the two came to his father and said, "Father, give me my share of the estate." Right away Jesus shocks us with this younger son who brashly tells his father, "Give me my share of the estate." I don't know about you, but if one of my sons came to me and demanded that I give them some money, I would question whether that were a wise thing to do. The father had every right to say no to his demanding son, but he doesn't. Instead, he gives him his portion of the inheritance. Think of the strain that would put on the estate. How could it even keep going with half of the assets converted to cash and given to the son? See how much the father loves his son and how our heavenly Father gives us blessings we don't deserve.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living." He has no intention of buying another estate further down the road that he can develop and still be close to family and friends. He wants the freedom to live a wild life and to throw the best parties. Here is where the word "prodigal" comes in. It is an old English word that means "wasteful." It didn't take long for him to waste the money from the family estate.

Then the bottom falls out. "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country, and he began to be in need." Times change. The stock market crashes. The housing prices fall. There are no jobs. The high roller had to settle for job that involved feeding pigs, not sheep but pigs! The word in the Greek actually means pasturing pigs. How do you pasture pigs? He sees the pigs eating the pods that fall down from the trees. Grunting, snorting, squealing pigs have food to eat, but no one is giving him any food to eat.

In the deepest pit of despond and despair, this pig-headed lost son comes to his senses. "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.'" When you are really hungry you start thinking about food all the time and even dream about it at night. He thought of the wonderful

meals he had home with his family. He thought about how much he missed his father and the love his father had for him.

Now the light bulb goes on. In the deepest pit of darkness, the light goes on and he develops a plan. It was a good plan. "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am now longer worthy to be called you son; make me like one of your hired servants.'" He knew the servants weren't starving and just maybe he could earn back some of the love from his father that he did not deserve.

He comes home. The man who left looking like a prince with the finest clothes, comes home like a pauper dirty and disheveled. He knows what he is going to say as he sees the familiar roads and paths that lead to the family estate. "Father, I have sinned, Father I have sinned against heaven and you..". The story Jesus tells reflects the tax collectors and sinners who came to him repenting of their sins. The story is similar to another story about a tax collector who went to the temple, bowed his head and prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner." It remind me of someone I know very well. "Almighty God, merciful Father, I a poor miserable sinner confess unto you all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee."

So what are you going to say to this son who rebelled against his father and spent all his inheritance in wild living and made his living pasturing pigs? I know how the non practicing Muslim Ahmud and the Pharisees would end this story. They would have the father telling the son what a mess he made of his life. They would have the father demand that his son become one of the servants to see if he can make up for what he had done wrong.

As you know that's not how Jesus told the story. "And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He threw his arms around him and kissed him." Jesus wants us to think of the father seeing his son a far way off. He wants us to imagine how this father has been looking and hoping and praying for that son to return, just as parents today pray for their children to come back to Jesus. Before the son can even say a word the father has his arms around him and is kissing him. And when the son starts to speak, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be your child," the father doesn't even let him finish the part where he asks if he can be a hired servant. No, the father shouts for his servants to bring the best robe, and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. He calls for them to bring the fattened calf so they can have a fiesta of all fiestas to celebrate the return of his son.

That's what Jesus did when tax collectors and sinners came to him repenting of their sin. He celebrated the joy that comes from knowing sin is forgiven. What the father said about his son Jesus could say about the people who came to him. "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Remember what Jesus said after celebrating forgiveness in the home of the tax collector Zacchaeus: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."

It's wonderful to be home isn't it? It's wonderful to have the ring on the finger and the best robe and the sandals on the feet. And the feast of all feasts, the fattened calf and

the fresh bread, and the dancing and the singing and the music. It's good to be home. Yes, Jesus forgives us of even our most despicable sins. That is why he went to the cross for us. The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us. He does not ask us to come to him and grovel before him to earn his favor. He does not come to offer us probation but completely pardon. He wants us celebrating in his Father's house forever.

The second lost son

That's the story of the lost son. But wait didn't we say this was the story of two lost sons? The younger son left home and became lost, but the older son stayed home and also became lost. He comes home from working in the field. He hears the sound of music and dancing. The servants tell him the good news that his brother has come home and his father has killed the fattened calf because the lost son is home safe and sound. It is at this point the older brother's face becomes red. The veins on his neck bulge with anger. He refused to join in the celebration.

That's the way it was with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They refused to join in the celebration that Jesus had with the tax collectors and sinners who confessed their sin and found forgiveness in Jesus. That's the way it was with Ahmud who despised Jesus for turning to a dying thief and giving him Paradise. That's the way it was for a Hmong pastor in Vietnam who confessed that he would always give people the law, until through one of our WELS Hmong pastors he learned how to bring people the pure message of the gospel. How easy it is to become lost and think it is wrong to freely forgive people of their sins through Jesus.

The father reaches out to this second son who is was lost and hated the forgiveness his father had given to his brother. Notice how he speaks to his father, "All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet, you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." He despises his father for welcoming his brother home and killing the fattened calf for him. In love the father reaches out to his son, "My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found."

How long did it take for this older son to come around and share his father's joy? Jesus does not put that into this story. He wants us to put ourselves into this story of the two lost sons. "Yes, I can think of times when I have played the part of the older brother and not celebrated how lost people come home." "Yes, I can think of times when I have been like that son who left home and went his own way, but now I am back home." My fellow believers, it's time to celebrate. It is time to have a fiesta of all fiestas, feast and sing and dance. In these last days in which we live Jesus is still welcoming sinners to come to him and find forgiveness. He is still seeking the lost and bringing dead people to life through the message of the gospel that goes out into all the world. Amen.