

"Lost 'n' Found"

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 32:1-2

Bishop Ernest Fitzgerald tells of one cold, dreary winter evening when several hundred people gathered at a large downtown church in Winston-Salem, NC for a special worship celebration.¹

"I had gone down a long hallway to help a small boy who was pushing against massive oak doors trying to get outside. ... I picked him up, thinking he belonged to someone at (the gathering)." Fitzgerald asked the boy about this, but got no answer. So he rushed outside and spotted an old-model car speeding away in the darkness. Gradually, it began to dawn on him. The child had been abandoned. "I made a few calls says Fitzgerald, and soon the church was filled with people wanting to help in any way they could. Within moments, the local TV stations interrupted their usual programs to ask if anyone knew the identity of the little boy."

The next morning, one of the city's newspapers had the child's picture on the front page. The reporter began his story with this striking line: "Someone trusted the church last night, and the church came through!" Reflecting on this, Fitzgerald says, "There is a deep hunger across our land as countless people grope for answers to the deepest questions of the human spirit. The message of Christ speaks to these questions, bringing hope and light to people who now stumble in the dark and live in despair."

In Our New Testament lesson, Jesus tells of a young man who stumbled around in the dark and lived in the despair. But he, too, found that when one trusts in the Spirit of Christ which forms the church, God comes through.

The story of the Prodigal Son is really the story of the Prodigal Son, his father and his brother. It's the story of what we risk when we over indulge our wants and desires. It's a story of losing touch with our calling in Christ and what a loss that is in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Let's first look at the father (and we're not even going to get to the older son today – just the father and the younger son). In Jesus' parable – a parable is a lesson embedded in a picture brought to life through a story – in Jesus' parable, "The younger (son says) to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'

¹ Bishop Ernest Fitzgerald, "Someone Trusted the Church," Michigan Christian Advocate, May 5, 1997, 8.

So (the father) divides his property between (his two sons),” and the younger son takes the money and squanders it on a life of lust and gluttony. That’s the son’s indulgence. But what about the father who gave the son all that money?

Looking at the father, can anyone guess what the father is indulging in at the expense of his higher calling in life? Anyone? That’s right. The kid asks for the moon, and what does the father do? He indulges his son instead of parenting him.

Whether it’s out of a desire to be the “coolest dad on the block,” or weakness as a parent, or even wanting to teach his son a lesson, the father’s misguided actions have consequences. His son proves to be too immature to handle such a large sum of money; he could die out there on his own.

We see this, “When (the son) had spent everything,” and Jesus says, “a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.” Jesus goes on to tell how the son works on a pig farm just to get by, and even then he’s starving. This son has no hope apart from his family.

And yet, as lost as this young man is, he is not without hope. He still has family. “So he (sets) off and (goes) to his father,” planning to confess to his father, saying, “I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” This is what he plans to say. “Treat me like one of your hired hands.’ That’s the plan.

It’s a plan of self-evaluation and humility, a plan of appreciation for what one has and for what really matters in life. It’s a good plan, and especially when we find ourselves turning to indulgences in the face of some unmet needs, whether spiritual, emotional or physical.

What’s that like when we find ourselves ***lost in our over indulgences?***
We indulge our need to earn money at the expense of spending time with family – we lose touch with those closest to us.

We indulge our need to grow up and make our way in this world at the expense of our child-like joy and self-expression. We lose touch with our calling to enjoy life and play.

We indulge our desire to be right at the expense of our integrity – we lose touch with our sense of right and wrong.

We indulge the temptation to have things handed to us at the expense of our self-worth. We lose touch with our abilities to contribute in meaningful ways, ways that are valued by society and by God.

We indulge our critical nature at the expense of self-love and love of others. We lose touch with compassion and grace and blessing – being a blessing in the lives of others.

That's a lot to lose! And what have we gained? More money, more stress, more lies, more self-loathing, more hatred and isolation. That's no way to live. And I know that's not really how you live. But you've got to admit that we all find ourselves from time to time, on the edge of falling into any one of these traps – the love of money and success, the trap of being self-righteousness or of selling ourselves short, and the trap of being overly critical of others. These dangers are out there for all of us. No one is immune.

I mean look at the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They are so self-righteous that they look at all Jesus is doing and say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus tells them a parable, our parable that we're looking at today, the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In this parable, Jesus points us in one direction and one direction only. Jesus points us to "the father." To ensure that we always have a sense of family, joy, truth, self-respect, love, and blessing, Jesus points us to God.

In Jesus' parable, the father is a lot like God. God loves us so much that God lets us choose, just like the father let the son choose. We have free will. And this is not just God *showing* us love. This is God *being* love for us, having love for us beyond our wildest imaginations, and certainly beyond our ability to fully and unconditionally love ourselves and others. We know and experience the heights and depths of God's love for us (like the younger son) because, even when we choose poorly – as the younger son did – God **welcomes us back home** with arms wide open. Or, as we see in Jesus' parable, the son returns and says: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father (says) to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'"

We are never so lost that – even in our own indulgences - we can't turn to God and be found – found in the unmerited blessing of God, found in God's compassion and grace, found worthy in God's eyes, found joyfully playing in God's creation, found safe and secure in God's family of faith. Welcome home. You once were lost - we all were- and now are found.

As we make our way through a world full of choices, full of indulgences, full of temptations, let us not forget that God is always there to welcome us home. In Christ, **the outstretched arms of God** are never closed to us, just like the father who Jesus pictures running out to his wayward son, putting his arms around him, and kissing him.

Do me a favor as we end our sermon time today. Hold your arms out as far as you can, as best you can – go ahead and stand up, give yourself a little room – hold your arms out as far as you can, for as long as you can.

Now, take a moment to thank Jesus for being the one who provides this ultimate welcome home— for us when we're lost AND *through us* when someone else is in need.

You may be seated. Put your arms down, put them down for now, until you are inspired again by Jesus to lift them up and hold them out, embracing the love and mercy of God for yourself AND extending God's love and mercy to others.

As a reminder to do that this week and in all your days ahead, look up at the cross. Let me tell you another very brief story; it will just take a minute. Max Lucado in his book *Six Hours One Friday* wonders if Jesus used his hands while telling this parable of the loving father and his sons. When Jesus got to the point in the story where the overjoyed father runs out to meet his broken-down son, did he open his arms wide to illustrate the point? "Whether he did that day or not," says Lucado, "I don't know. But I know that he did later. He later stretched his hands as open as he could. He forced his arms so wide apart that it hurt. And to prove that those arms would never fold and those hands would never close, he had them nailed open. They still are." Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, your grace is a mystery that is incomprehensible to us. It draws us to you, inviting us into your presence. It allows us to experience your delight in us and helps us to trust your love, which we do not deserve.

It is only by your grace that we dare to hope for the blessings of this life and the life everlasting with you. Thank you for this mystery.

Thank you for grace that amazes us, encourages us, guides us and comforts us. We lift up prayers of thanksgiving for the healing you provide – and particularly for the treatments for Mary and Emily that bring so much hope.

We pray your strength upon them and all those recovering from illness, injury and disease.

We pray for those who have suffered loss, that in you they may find a way forward. Be with those in need at this time, meeting them where they are and providing for them the physical, spiritual and emotional support so dearly needed.

And where we can be a channel for your care and concern, your embrace and welcome, your encouragement and support, let us do so boldly, confidently, graciously – to your glory.

In other words, let our lives be our grateful response for your extravagant gift of life and love and joy and peace. We pray all this in the name of the One who makes it all possible, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**