

Sermon 7-5-20

Kate Fields preaching

This morning, we are exploring the story of The Prodigal's Son. Or we can say the Prodigal's child.

As we journey through such a strange, stressful and uncertain time in our personal lives and in the life of our country, I think this is a good parable or story for us to sit with today. This parable has certainly been a blessing this week to our Belmont children, who have been guided by it all week for the first week of Compassion Camp. We have done a gathering bible story, crafts, music, compassion in action and movement that have all reflected differing dimensions of the Prodigal's child story. Through our study of it, we focused on this idea of compassion as seeing one another.

I am excited to invite y'all, the congregation of Belmont into this scripture text with our Compassion Campers. So here in the Gospel of Luke, we are in the chapters which tell the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, where Passover will be held and where he will later be crucified.

But we are not there quite yet. Today we are in chapter 15. Let me set the context for the Prodigal's Child story. Why did Jesus tell it? Well there is a crowd of people gathered to listen to Jesus. This is not an anonymous crowd though, no, this is a crowd of sinners and tax collectors, we are told.

It's kind of funny that there were the sinners, and then there were the tax collectors. I mean, two thousands years later, have tax collectors gained any better of a rep? Maybe that's not the greatest joke this close to when taxes are due on July 15th.

In antiquity during Jesus' time, tax collectors would have drawn a certain suspicion and disdain from the Jewish populace because they worked for Rome by collecting the high taxes required to be in good standing with Rome. And sometimes they skimmed off the top, which is how they funded themselves. Kind of a crummy job.

So there were tax collectors and then there were the sinners. I don't know about you, but when I read this, I think— okay— calling a crowd 'sinners' tells me nothing except that the people in the crowd were actually just people.

Anyway, the religious leaders who were watching Jesus hang out with tax collectors and sinners were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Grumble, grumble.

And Jesus like: lemme tell all y'all a story. And he actually tells three stories about something that has been lost. A lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. And today, we are focusing on the last one. The parable of the lost son, as AJ Levine has noted.

In this parable, we see a son who is ready to sow his wild oats and goes to his dad and is like: “Dad, I’d like my inheritance money early so that I can go squander it on junk.” And he sure did. He went off and gallivanted around doing who knows what all and having a great time— and eventually, of course, the money ran out. He gets hungry and takes a job feeding pigs, but is so hungry that he starts envying the pigs that he’s feeding. He realizes how badly he has screwed up and is like: “I’ve got to get myself together and come up with a plan.” So he starts to head back home with a plan to tell his dad: “Dad, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; would you just treat me like one of your hired hands?”

See this son realized he had screwed up— and he had— but then he takes it a step further and starts to believe that he didn’t just screw up but that he *is* a screw up.

The guilt becomes shame and that is a toxic turn. It started with believing that there was something he had to do to be worthy of his father’s love.

So he goes home and expects to be met with reproach and punishment, and instead of the thing you think is going to happen, the plot takes a twist. A merciful twist. Instead, the lost son is met with mercy and extravagant welcome by his dad. And probably his mom too but unfortunately, we don’t get to know that!

Okay, prior to the strange days and necessary precautions of Covid-19, have you ever walked into someone’s home and they are so gloriously happy that you’ve come? They give you a big hug and warm welcome and say “come on in!” and make you feel at home? I imagine that happened here— when he sees his son, the father doesn’t walk, he RUNS to greet him and hold him in his arms again.

Jesus tells us that the father is filled with *compassion*— a strong Greek word is used here that describes a physical aching— the word means that the father’s innards actually ached— he was so moved that his son was home. This is a very physical, visceral response to his son coming back home again. This is a powerful kind of compassion. He was so glad that his son was home that he ached as he ran to meet him. Mercy! The thing we expected— did not happen.

This story reminds me of the story in the Gospel of John about a woman who was about to be stoned to death and Jesus stepped in front of her and said to the murderous crowd: “all you who are without sin, throw the first stone!” And the crowd disappeared. I think this is another one of those moments where what we think is going to happen, doesn’t. A moment where mercy triumphs over judgement.

Back to the story: the son, believing that he is a royal screw up, says: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

But his dad interrupts him here— no more of that!!! (Right? Because the son had planned to add to that— would you let me work as a servant?) Dad's not having that. He asks the servants to bring out the fanciest robe and put the family ring back on his son's finger and while we are at it, these ratty sandals will not do— look at these sores from walking so far, let's get some good sandals on his feet. And mercy, he must be starving from traveling so far! Let's put the fanciest food that we have on the table, for we have something big to celebrate, for my son was dead and is now alive again— he was lost and now he is found!!

So while they were having a barbecue and dance party, the older son comes in from working hard in the field all day. He is hot and very tired from the hard day's work and then he hears the dance party. He asks one of the servants: "dude, what's up with this?" and the servant said: "Your brother has come home and your father threw him a party because he was so happy that your brother isn't dead."

Well, the older son was "royally cheesed" and put up his hand and refused to join the party of his irresponsible brother. His father came out and pleaded with him to come in to join in the celebration. The older son said: "Listen dad, I've been working so hard for you for years; I've never disappointed you or disobeyed you and yet, I've never been given this kind of celebration— you've *never thrown me* a barbecue and even more than that, you didn't even have the decency to come and get me from the fields to invite me to this barbecue! Dad, you don't see me. I'm doing everything here and —you just don't see me.

I think his dad needed to hear that. The dad answered his son, saying:

"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

And it occurs to me that the father had two lost sons, not just the one.

His younger son knew he was lost. He had lost his way. He believed his screwing up made him a screw up and that he was not worthy of being his father's son any longer.

But the older son was lost too. He had worked so hard for so long and didn't feel seen. He felt like nothing he did was enough. He also did not feel worthy of being his father's son because if he was, he would have been seen and appreciated for how he kept the ship running for his father.

This is a parable of two lost sons.

Both of these sons were lost in their own ways. Both of the sons thought that their actions determined whether or not they were worthy of their father's love.

They were lost in untruths. And they need some de-conversion from those. They needed to get up close and personal with compassion.

I'm glad that Jesus teaches us about lost things because being lost is not something that is unfamiliar to us.

We lose stuff, right? We're busy people and those car keys should have been right there! And we end up finding them in the freezer or some such place like that!

Car keys aside though— feeling lost is a pretty universal human experience. And I don't mean the kind of lost where you're in a new city and don't know the roads... though we've all been there— my uncle even got lost in a large parking lot once. He calls getting lost his superpower.

I mean the kind of lost where you are lost in life. Especially right now, when so many things are nothing like they were even six months ago. It's like we living in a set of parenthesis where we knew the beginning of the sentence but we are in the in-between time and have no idea what the end of the sentence will look like or when we'll get there.

This virus has us all kind of lost. Lost in ambiguous grief about so many plans that we are not getting a chance to see happen. Lost in fear about our own health and the health of those we love. Lost in isolation since we haven't been able to be physically together.

There are times when we feel more lost than we have ever felt before and this really feels like one of those times.

But even if remove this pandemic from the situation, there are still so many other ways we can feel lost.

Maybe you are going through a life transition that is unfamiliar and there are not many sign posts to guide the way.

Maybe something painful or traumatic has happened and it is hard to remember who you are.

Maybe the motivation that was once so easy to access seems to have vanished.

Maybe the faith that you had in God just isn't there anymore.

Maybe you just don't feel like you belong anymore and you feel lost.

Or maybe you've lost someone to death or a relationship that ended and you're just so lost without them.

The core of being lost is that you just don't have any bearings about who you are anymore. It causes anxiety, sometimes even panic. You can't rest or chill out.

And in that hard moment, God moves toward us. The One who created us reminds us of who we are. We are beloved. We are created in love and created to love. And there's nothing we can do to earn God's love. My mom used to tell me: "there's nothing you can do to make me not love you. You will always be my child and I will always love you.

This is how the father treated his two children. And it's a story Jesus told us about how God loves us. There's nothing we can do to make us no longer children of God. God's grace is round and borderless and there isn't a toll booth you have to go through to receive it.

And also, we want to live in right-relationship with God and each other, right, not because we are trying to earn God's favor or love, but because it's the way to abundant life. It is the good stuff.

All of this is an astoundingly good roadmap for feeling lost.

Remember that Jesus told these three stories about lost things to a crowd of "sinners" and "tax collectors."

Something about this crowd was lost.

Maybe some of them had fallen through society's social cracks and were lost but no one cared. Maybe some of them believed they deserved to be lost. Maybe some of them had lost their way and were making a good living by exploiting their kinfolk.

And Jesus tells this story that essentially says: my mercy and grace is not only extravagant but it's a huge neon sign that says "welcome home." And it's yours and it will guide you home when you are lost.

We need to celebrate because you were lost and now you're found.

This is the kind of love that God has for us. A love that looks for you, sees you, finds you, and celebrates you. AND it is always calling you to be your best self. So if you aren't sure what to do because you are lost in new territory that Covid has created, how about we try this: remember you are loved, worship God - keep your vision set on the ways of the Gospel, and find ways to intentionally and strategically love people. And remember, Dr. Cornell West said it best: "justice is what love looks like in public."

Even and most especially in a pandemic, we can live abundantly and we can work for the abundance of others.

As the father said: "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

May it be so with us. In the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.