

From Lost To Found
Lenten Series on the Prodigal Son
Luke 15: 1-32
Don Lincoln

Once again, we've chosen to do a "deep dive" into ONE story for our Lenten preaching. We've done that before. In 2004 we spent the entire Lenten Season – all seven Sundays including Palm Sunday and Easter in John 11, the story of the raising of Lazarus. Then in 2015 we preached through the 23rd Psalm each week of Lent. Taking the text apart and savoring it.

This year, it's a deep-dive into the parable known as the Prodigal Son. One of the most beloved stories Jesus told. It is simple, yet rich. It is multi-layered, and we'll explore that. For the scope of what it covers, it's relatively short. But already you've noted something if you were paying attention. What I read was longer than our typical Sunday morning lesson, and I read ALL of Luke 15. Lost Sheep; Lost Coin; Lost Son – or perhaps lost SONS – but I get ahead of myself!

I read the whole chapter because when the lectionary crafters – the folks who choose these texts (a three-year cycle of scripture that takes us through most of the Bible, a preaching cycle which we follow a fair amount of the time here at Westminster); when the lectionary crafters include the Prodigal Son on the agenda they always include the opening verses of this chapter, verse 1-3. *"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. So..... Jesus told them this parable.'* THIS parable. NOT the Prodigal Son, but the one about the sheep. Which then goes right into the one about the coin. Which then goes right into the one about the two sons.

Three different, but connected stories – all in response to one circumstance – Pharisees and scribes grumbling and commenting on the company with whom Jesus is eating. So, it seems prudent, by way of introduction to the last story, the Prodigal Son, to set the stage, the backdrop of what's taking place, what the context is in Jesus' speaking, and why He is talking about this.

First off – table fellowship was serious business in the Middle East back then. Still is. As it is for us. Who do you invite to your table? Family. Friends. Maybe SOME neighbors. Not the "sinners." Not the dregs of society. Let's be honest. Table fellowship is WAY more serious than pew-sharing, and you and I know how we can be about THAT!!

But remember, the Pharisees and scribes had legitimate concerns. Think about extending welcome to "sinners" – and then think drug dealers, porn peddlers, muggers, thieves, traffickers, gang members, cheating taxpayers, computer hackers, con

artists....so when we beat up on the Pharisees and the scribes and their attitudes, chances are you and I have to include ourselves as well. Which sets the stage for these stories – an attitude of exclusion, of protection, of guarding and of careful living. Stick with the good folks; keep your boundaries, stick with the insiders, not the riff-raff....

Let me ask this: How many of you have ever been lost? Raise your hands. OK. And – how many of you asked for directions immediately? Some of you are really good about that; others of us not so much. The old stereotype is often true.

People get lost in this building all the time. I don't know if you remember the first time you came here; but it is confusing. I kept seeing courtyard and I never knew where I was. Don't you love it when a road closure isn't reported to your Google Maps or your car's navigation system –and suddenly you find yourself at barriers, your navigation system telling you to drive forward, and you have no clue where to go?

These stories are about lostness. And about being found. Plain and simple. They describe a condition in which we all find ourselves – whether we're do-gooder Pharisees or prodigal children. Leaning way forward you already get a hint that that means these stories are good news for us.

Let me ask you, how often did Jesus talk about the lost – about the least, the littlest, the last, the left out and the lost? ALL THE TIME!

How many times did Jesus say that to lose is to win, to be last is to be first, to be dead is to be alive – so much so that it's hard to imagine how we can miss the truth Jesus is illustrating in these stories – that it is ONLY when you and I realize our lost-ness do we actually come closer to being found.

Which leads to an interesting question to ponder from these three stories – and sets the stage for our deeper look at the prodigal in the coming weeks.

What responsibility is there on the part of the one lost for their lost-ness? You and I know all too well – if the Pharisee in us had its way with our definition of sinner – we would say the sinner's lost-ness is the sinner's fault.

So – think about the coin. And it's lost-ness. What intentionality did the coin have in its lostness? What did it do to get lost?

Now – I know. Some things just seem to have a knack for getting lost. I own lots of them. We'd swear it's intentional. I used to wear hard contact lenses. And when you dropped one it had built in camouflage – it just disappears. It does seem, the more important it is when you drop it, the further away it goes. It NEVER stays right where you dropped it. It always hits oddly – and is projected at a lateral angle 20 feet away under some furniture where you would never imagine looking under.

I recall dropping a wedding ring once while officiating in a wedding in a church in Medford, NJ. I swear it sprouted legs. It bounded down all six marble steps, landed perfectly upright on the carpet and then rolled and rolled until it lost momentum and

came to rest right underneath great aunt Gertrude seated in the eighth pew. It took almost as long to find the ring as it did to pronounce the couple married. But the ring WAS innocent. Maybe it's in its nature to roll.

What about the sheep as the wayward sinner? I mean, was there a sinister plot on the part of the sheep to become lost? A moment where it suddenly thought to itself – "I'm outta here. Let's give the shepherd what for!"

The sheep was, in all likelihood, being sheepy. A nibble here and a nibble there and suddenly it's left the flock. It's why flocks have shepherds. And sheepdogs. Maybe Jesus is speaking about that tendency in our lives – a nibble here, a nibble there, and suddenly we are lost. We didn't set out to be that way.

But O, you and I say – when it comes to the Prodigal Son – now there's a difference. Look at what the rascal did! But I want to say, "Not so fast."

How many of us, at one point in our life, were the self-centered teenager who says – either to the parent's face or from behind the bedroom door, while making hand gestures towards them, mumbled to myself, "You're the worst parent in the world. I can't stand you. I wish I could just leave!" How many of us, as parents, have heard those words, or at least observed the looks, or those "huge sighs" that indicate the thoughts are in there?

And you and I know it's not just a teenage affliction. Over and over there are moments in life when you and I prove our broken nature – maybe not the perfect nature that God intended in the Garden – but at least our broken nature tends toward lost-ness. I changed the first hymn mid-week to Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing because right in the middle of that text our these words,

"Prone to Wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." That's not just prone to wander, take a stroll through the garden....

PRONE TO LEAVE THE GOD I LOVE. I'm prone to get off the path. I don't even have to have an intentionality about it. It's just my nature – like the ring or like the coin. It's just a roll in the wrong direction.

I did a funeral last week for a woman born the same year I was. It's always a little different when you are doing funerals for people your age or younger. This woman died from organ failure caused by her addiction. I spoke about how her addiction took the very best of her away from her family and friends – but it also took the very best of her away from her. And she could not conquer the disease. Who knows why some people are prone to that kind of addiction?

But I also reminded those present that day – we all have our addictions. Some of us it's to our looks – or our toys – or to our power – or our youthfulness or our attempts to youthfulness – or even to our precious routines and expectations of others and how outraged we are when they fail. And sometimes it's as if you and I cannot help

ourselves – it seems as if it's in our very nature to be the way we are. Prone to wander, Lord I feel it.

So it is to US – all of us prone-to-wander folks – that Jesus tells these stories. As well as to the Scribes and Pharisees who cannot imagine they are ever out of line – which of course, is sometimes the very epitome of being out of line when you cannot imagine ever lost-ness!

And the good news for us in all three of these parables – the shepherd and the sheep, the woman and the coin, the father and the sons, the GOD character. It's cool that the god character is the shepherd which was a detested and low occupation on the totem pole. A woman – who would have put a god figure in a woman and this father, even a human being. But the God figure in every one of these stories isn't going to give up until they have found what is lost.

The shepherd and the sheep; the woman and the coin; the father and the sons – whether you're one out of a hundred, one out of ten, one out of two. All valued. All precious. The hound of heaven – as one theologian calls God – the Hound of Heaven is not going to stop until He chases you down and brings you back to the fold.

Which is why the one other thing common in these stories is such a gift to us. Did you notice, there is a common word in all of three stories? “REJOICE!” The shepherd finds the sheep, lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. When he gets home, he calls the friends and neighbors and says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

The woman, after searching, searching, searching, when she finds the coin, calls together her friends and neighbors saying “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

And the father to the elder son – “We HAD to rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

The least, the last, the lost, the dead! Jesus says that's who God is after. Thanks be to God. Because that's every one of us.

So – friends let us enter our Lenten journey, and I don't know whether you are going out the gate or whether you are coming in the gate. Wherever you are on your Lenten journey – all we who are prone to wander – let us give thanks for this God who NEVER gives up on our lost-ness, and who promises there will be rejoicing whenever we are found.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN