

**Lost and Found**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2016

We had to celebrate and rejoice; for this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.  
Luke 15:32

The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most well known of Jesus' teaching stories and who hasn't identified with one or the other of the brothers? According to Jewish law, a younger son is entitled to a third of his inheritance, but to ask for it before his father's death is presumptuous. Despite that, the younger son takes what is his and spends it all in dissolute living, or as the King James Version expresses it, "he wastes his substance with riotous living." In his shortsightedness, he isn't thinking about what he is doing. In fact, he really isn't thinking at all.

When he has gone through all his money he finds himself reduced to having to take a job feeding the pigs and subsisting on their leftovers. Being forced to care for unclean animals is demeaning and humiliating, but he has to in order to survive. Then the narrative turns as, "he came to himself." He realizes that he has made some seriously wrong choices.

If we make bad decisions and go down the wrong path, there is a point when we have to come to our senses. Reality sets in and we realize what is going on and where we are headed. For this young man, it is the first time in his life that he has to confront himself. He has blown all his resources and has hit a wall. There is only one thing left to do. He must return home and admit to his father that he was wrong in wasting his inheritance. In desperation, he is willing to work as one of his father's hired hands feeding the pigs.

When the father sees his lost son returning home, he doesn't wait for him but goes out to welcome him back. He orders a banquet feast and invites everyone to welcome the return of his lost son. Everyone joins in festivities, everyone, that is, except the elder brother. He is incensed. Why is this profligate brother rewarded for being irresponsible? He has stayed home and has faithfully fulfilled his duties, working hard and doing everything expected of him. And what does he get for it? Nothing! He is so resentful of his father's generosity that he can only refer to his brother as "this son of yours."

Now, with whom do you identify? Who is the better character in this story? Is it the one who stays home and does what is expected of him or is it the one who ventures out, takes risks, makes bad decisions and repents. One brother leaves home and is lost while the other is lost without ever leaving home. One of them is responsible with his money by being careful in spending while the other spends it all in no time.

Is this about an indulgent parent with the need to be needed bailing out his son while the other continues to be thrifty? Is it right that more is expected of the one who behaves responsibly than the one who is not? This may certainly seem like an odd value system.

This parable is not about God rewarding people for irresponsibility. It is about mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is about welcoming back a repentant sinner. The father is as generous in his forgiveness as the younger son has been prodigious in spending his inheritance. While the father rejoices that his son has recognized his fault and is accepting responsibility for his actions, the elder brother is so caught up in his own righteous indignation that he can't bring himself to share in the joy of his brother's return. Just as the repentant son is welcomed back, God rejoices and welcomes us back when we are repentant and return.

What we learn from this parable is that when we make bad decisions and take responsibility for our actions, there is rejoicing in God's realm. Just as the father went out to greet his son on his arrival, God took the initiative to come to us in Christ who welcomes our sincere repentance and intent to make amends.

The two brothers in this parable represent two types of people. The elder brother is the child of the law and the second is the child of grace. The elder brother lives by the rules and is quite righteous about it while the prodigal brother knows his faults and weakness and has the humility to come to terms with it and is welcomed back. The elder brother doesn't understand because he never takes any risks or ventures out of his comfort zone. He needs to be reconciled with both his brother and his father. He has as much to learn about forgiveness as his younger brother has learned about personal responsibility and repentance.

The elder brother represents an attitude that operates on the merit system in which there is expectation of reward for good behavior and punishment for bad behavior. It's just not that simple. It is not up to us to judge who is deserving of God's mercy and who is not. God owes us nothing; we owe God everything. The elder brother in this teaching is as much a prodigal as the younger one.

Those who deserve God's mercy are those who are serious about their repentance. If we accept our own forgiveness we have no choice but to forgive others. Like the father in this story, God is prodigious in both giving and forgiving. God's grace cannot be earned; it is a gift. It is not given as a reward for good behavior. Grace is a by-product of our repentance. It is neither deserved nor earned. We must never begrudge God's mercy and justice.

This teaching story is not about cheap grace; it is not about getting off the hook or being rewarded for irresponsibility. This is about being honest with ourselves when we make wrong choices. When we admit our mistakes and repent, it is an occasion for rejoicing. In God's system of justice, those who are least are first and those who think they should be first are last. Grace and mercy are gifts we want as much for others as we want for ourselves.

The 20th century theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once wrote that there is only one petition in the Lord's Prayer that has any condition attached to it; it is the petition to forgive. This is an essential point of Christian living we all have to learn.