

March 18, 2007
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
First Parish, Brunswick
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The Welcome Table

If you've been shopping at Hannaford's here in Brunswick lately, you know the experience of looking for something that is lost. They are refurbishing the store, and in so doing are rearranging the location of items. So it has become a challenge to find what you are looking for. Sometimes I've been able to "rejoice" that I found an item, but at least a couple of times I just gave up.

At our house, we have the proverbial hunts for car keys, cell phones, and the TV remote. However, when you get right down to it, all this type of hunting for lost items is really just an annoyance.

The three parables in chapter 15 of Luke, on the other hand, speak of more significant searches. As the Junior Choir reminded us, these are the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In the first two parables the shepherd and the woman search for the sheep and the coin because these things are very important to them and they cannot "find" themselves. The story of the lost son is a more textured exploration of the "lost and found" theme of this chapter, for it explores a different kind of "lost." It's not about being physically lost. This story is about being spiritually lost. It is about separation and alienation. And the story reminds us that just as humans make decisions that lead them to be lost, humans can make decisions to "come to themselves" – to be found.

The parable is set in the context of family relationships where we often know the best and the worst of human relationships.

We have a man and his two sons. And there is tension among them. Sometimes with youth, I tell the story as a mother and her two daughters. Either way, it's an age old story.

A 20th century encounter with one of the themes of this story is told by G. W. Rosenbery. It is an experience from his early ministry. (Recorded in J. Wallace Haimilton's *Horns and Halos in Human Nature*.)

Rosenbery was on a train traveling to a conference. He noticed a young man in his late teens who was obviously agitated. After a while, Rosenbery went to the young man and asked him what was bothering him. The young man hesitated for a second, but then told his story, "I'm from the next town. We'll be there shortly. My folks live just this side of town. I lived there until three years ago. I had a fight with my father. I stormed out saying, 'You'll never see me again.' I haven't been back since. They've been tough years.

Sometimes I write to my mom. Last week I wrote her and told her I'd be coming by on the train today. I told her if it was alright for me to stop to hang something white outside the house so I'd know it was OK. But she had to check with my dad. I need to know how he feels."

The young man looked up and realized where they were. Sir, we're almost there. Just around this bend. I can't look. Will you tell me if there is something white?"

The minister kept watch. As they rounded the bend, he stood up, saying, "Son, you've got to see this." There stood the little farmhouse under the trees, but you could hardly see the house for the white. Every bed sheet, tablecloth, pillowcase, and even handkerchiefs were hanging from the house, the clothes line and the trees...

If this experience followed the story line of the parable, the father would be out front watching for the train. Then upon spying it, instead of waiting stoically he would have started running toward the train. That's what happens when the prodigal son returns. The father saw him when he was yet at a distance. And the father had compassion and ran out to meet him. Sometimes we miss these seemingly small parts of a story. I usually envision the son running home, just as Pearson did during the Junior Choir's anthem. But that's not what the story says. It's the father who runs. In ancient Palestine it was regarded as unbecoming – a loss of dignity – for a grown man to run. Yet, the father ran. And what a welcome! What a welcome table! Let the celebration begin.

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And they lived happily ever after... End of story. Not exactly. In fact, another part of the story is just beginning. Remember the man had **two** sons. In Act II, the older son arrives on the scene. At first it may seem as if the younger and older sons' stories are quite different. I'm not so sure. If we look at

their stories more closely, it seems there are many parallels.

In the beginning of each of their stories they are angry. Each story begins with alienation from the father. The younger son asks for his inheritance even before his father has died. It's like saying, "I wish you were dead." And then he runs away.

The older son is angry that the father is having such an extravagant celebration for the "little snot." Maybe it's that the forgiveness seems too quick, the grace too abundant. OK, maybe it would be appropriate to let the younger son return home. Judaism had clear provisions for the restoration of a penitent person, but where does it say that you have to have an extravaganza? Let the prodigal return,
but to bread and water, not a fatted calf;
in sackcloth, not the best robe;
wearing ashes, not a family ring;
in tears, not laughter;
groveling, not dancing.
Besides, who knows if he has really changed.

In both stories there is great prodigality. The younger son is prodigal in that he is recklessly wasteful and squanders his inheritance. Ironically, it is the father's prodigal nature that ties the two stories together. The second meaning of prodigal in the dictionary is "profuse in giving" or "exceedingly abundant." The father is profuse in giving and celebrating the return of his son. However, the older son sees this as just wasteful and disgusting. Can't you just hear the tag line of the Smothers Brothers, "Mom always liked you best."

Each of the sons finds himself alone and lost.

When the money's all gone, the younger son finds himself alone feeding swine, which were an abomination to Jewish sensibilities. The older son also finds himself alone, refusing to go in to the party.

They are both lost. The younger son is lost as a result of his selfishness. The older son is lost in his self righteousness.

The turning point

And so we come to the turning point in each of their stories. It says the younger son, "came to himself." No more excuses, no more illusions, no more hiding. He repented. He 'turned and went the other way.' And in so doing he came to the father, who runs out to meet him.

And what of the turning point in the story of the older son? In this story the father comes to the son first and reassures him, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." So, what does the older son do? Well, that's exactly the question with which the parable leaves us. This is an open ended parable. What does the older son do? Does he "come to himself?" Does he go to the Welcome Table?

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In a bible study group, I once had a man tell me how much he doesn't like this story. He didn't appreciate the story portraying the older son in a bad light. As the man said, "He'd done the right thing." In this comment, I think he was in touch with the disturbing and powerful challenge of this parable.

Remember, in Luke's gospel Jesus is telling this story in response to

complaints from the Pharisees and the scribes. They were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Imagine the tax collectors and the sinners along with the scribes and the Pharisees all listening to this story.

The Pharisees and the scribes were good folk. They worked hard to be faithful. They wanted other people to be faithful to God. They were disgusted by wanton, reckless, selfish behavior. They wondered why others couldn't just behave themselves. And then, their sensibilities were offended when this prophet/teacher Jesus welcomed at table tax collectors and sinners.

When are our sensibilities offended by God's extravagant grace? A grace so amazing that what was lost is found. A grace that provides a welcome table.

It is fairly obvious that we need to "come to ourselves" when we have wandered so far astray that we find ourselves "feeding swine." Thank God, we are welcomed home.

Yet, it can be harder to "come to ourselves" when we are already close to home. When we've been doing the right thing. When...we're not sure we like the company Jesus keeps.

This parable leaves us with the question: Shall we join Christ at the Welcome Table?