

Lent 4 / March 27, 2022

Luke 15:20

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

Our text is the third of three parables about seeking the lost. The first is the parable of the lost sheep, in which a shepherd with a hundred sheep, searches for one sheep and rejoices when he finds it. The second is the parable of the lost coin, in which a woman with ten coins searches her house and rejoices when she finds the lost one. Have you ever lost something valuable? How happy were you when you found what you had lost? If we lost a hundred-dollar bill, we wouldn't take feel happy that we still had two others. All we would think about is the one we lost! Like the woman who lost one silver coin, we would turn the house upside down and search. When we found it, we would feel happier than before we lost it, even though we have the same amount of money. When we lose something valuable, we go to great lengths to find it.

But we would only go to such lengths if what we lost had value to us. In Jesus' first parable the shepherd searches for a missing sheep. That's what shepherds do right? Not necessarily. It would depend on whether he owned the sheep, or was watching someone else's sheep. We might think of this parable in terms of a dearly loved pet, but sheep were not pets they were a commodity for sale. It would be a serious matter if a quarter of the flock went missing, but one out of a hundred is only 1% and falls well within the range of acceptable losses. The shepherd's extreme efforts to find one lost sheep, not his pet and probably someone else's property, shows his exceptional love for each sheep in his care. This is an extraordinarily good shepherd.

Jesus' parables use earthly examples to teach heavenly truths. This shepherd is no ordinary shepherd, or even an extraordinary shepherd. The Shepherd is none other than our God and Saviour Jesus Himself. He is the Good Shepherd. He cares for each and every sheep of His fold. He seeks to bring other lost sheep into His fold. His love is so deep and each one of His sheep so valuable that He would not consider the loss of even one sheep acceptable. He lay down His life for the whole world, including each one of us. Through Jesus the Father calls us into His kingdom. In Him we receive a joyous welcome.

Valuable objects and beloved creatures are one thing; but human relations are of another order. Who wouldn't rejoice at the return of a lost friend, spouse or child? Who wouldn't celebrate like the Father in Jesus' parable of the lost son, if someone we thought was lost forever came home? If someone we loved went missing through misadventure or foul play, we would feel surpassing joy if they returned to us safe and sound. But if someone returned, who had severely damaged our relationship, we might not be overjoyed. Some people, like the older brother in Jesus' parable, are happily estranged and have no desire for reconciliation.

The father in the parable is exceptional. No father in ancient Israel would have been so generous to give a son an inheritance in advance of his death. Any other father would have disowned a child who made such an offensive request. No father would have been so compassionate as to receive back such a son when he returned penniless. Only one Father is so generous. Only one Father has such love. The only father who could love so deeply and forgive such transgression is Our heavenly Father. In divine compassion, He sent Jesus to gather His lost and wayward sheep from every nation. In divine love, He gave Jesus to pay the debt of our sin; not with silver coins, but with His precious blood shed on the cross Through Jesus the Father calls. For His sake, we receive a joyous welcome into His heavenly kingdom.

Although traditionally referred to as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” the father stands out for his extreme love and deep compassion. We identify with the lost son, when we feel the guilt of our sin. We remember the love of the father, when we reach out for forgiveness. However, Jesus' focus is on the older son. He told this parable to the Pharisees and the Scribes. They are the older brothers who served their Father without receiving as much as a goat to celebrate with their friends. The father celebrates the return of the lost son in the first part of the parable, but in the second half the person who receives the attention is the older son. The father waits for the younger son to return. He goes searching for the older son. The Father loves all His children. In Jesus, He calls all of us to Himself. He rejoices when we return.

It's easy to feel antagonism towards the pharisees and scribes. They continually clashed with Jesus. Jesus pronounced seven woes upon them. He told His disciples to beware of their teaching and not to be like them. We use them as negative examples. We don't want to be pharisees. It's an insult to call someone a pharisee. Pharisee is a catchword for self-righteousness and hypocrisy. But the point is that the heavenly Father loved the scribes and pharisees too. He sent Jesus to seek them. He gave Jesus to be their Saviour! His efforts were not in vain. The greatest evangelist and apostle was a Pharisee who received Jesus as His Saviour. The Father loves all His children. He calls all of us to Himself through faith in Jesus. When we return heaven rejoices.

It has been observed that there is injustice in this parable. The social order is violated. The father sets a bad precedent by giving his son an early and undeserved inheritance. The rights of the older son are not respected. The early dispersal of half the estate will affect his future inheritance. Yet the parable is not about justice. The parable expresses God's love and compassion. God's love is not based on justice, or our sense of fairness. God's love is founded upon His compassion. Compassion is the pain God feels at the suffering we bring upon ourselves by our sin. God is not fair. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. He loves us as a father loves his children. God expresses the fullness of His compassion in giving Jesus. He shared our humanity. He sacrificed Himself for our forgiveness, so we would become members of His family. The Father welcomes us and all people into His kingdom through Jesus.

In terms of justice, the elder son had good reason to be upset. If we were in his place, we would be angry too! But remember, Jesus' parables use earthly situations to express a heavenly meaning. The meaning of this parable is not justice, divine or human. Both sons wrong their father, but the father loves both his children. He judges neither. He shows mercy to both. As St. James said, "Mercy triumphs over justice." This parable expresses the incomprehensible love of God. He loves all His children, wants all people to become His children and who welcomes all people into his kingdom through His Son Jesus, whom He gave to be our Saviour.

With whom do you identify? The Father, the prodigal son or the older brother? Perhaps you are struggling with quarreling children. Perhaps you feel anger towards someone and find it too difficult to forgive. Perhaps you wronged someone and are afraid you won't be forgiven. Perhaps you need assurance the heavenly Father will receive and welcome you. Perhaps you feel anger and resentment because your service to the heavenly Father is unappreciated, undervalued, not sufficiently acknowledged or rewarded. There are aspects in this parable to which we can all relate.

One thing we can all relate to is the Father's love and our need to receive His love for the sake of Christ. In some ways we are like the lost son, rebelling against the heavenly Father. In other ways we are like the self-righteous son, angry. But the heavenly Father loves us all. He reconciled us to Himself through the suffering and death of His obedient Son, Jesus our Saviour. God made Him a sin offering that in Him we would be forgiven and receive reconciliation with Him and each other. He calls us to Himself in Christ. Heaven rejoices when we come to Him.

Like the father in the parable, God feels compassion for the pain we suffer because of our sin. He gave Jesus that we would be reconciled to Him as children in the forgiveness of the cross. He gives Jesus that we would be reconciled to one another as sisters and brothers; children of the same heavenly Father. Jesus is the faithful, obedient son. He shared our humanity. He identified Himself with the outcasts. He reached out to the self-righteous. He bore the sins of the self-righteous and the unrighteous on the cross. In Him and through His blood sacrifice, we are reconciled to the Father as children and to each other as sisters and brothers. The Father calls through Jesus. Heaven rejoices when we answer the call. God bless us always with faith to believe. In Jesus' Name. Amen