

“Lost and Found”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent IV – March 6, 2016

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

We spent the week after Christmas visiting my parents in West Virginia. While we were gone, Debbie’s parents kept our dog, Ethel, at their house in Bloomington. When we left my parents’ house to come back to Indianapolis, we planned our drive by way of Bloomington, so we could pick Ethel up.

Around 2:00 that Saturday on our drive home, I called Debbie’s parents to let them know we were about an hour away from their house. I could tell by her dad’s voice that something was wrong. “Ethel’s gotten out and we can’t find her,” he said. Now, she has done this before at their house – she’s gotten out, was gone for about an hour, and came back safe and sound. But this time, Steve’s voice belied a different situation. She had actually been gone for more than four hours, and they had tried everything to locate her. It was January 2, and while the daytime temperatures were in the 30s, once the sun went down, it would drop into the teens that night. And they live out in the country, where needless to say, there are plenty of other animals that might pose a threat to her.

I vividly remember telling myself, “Don’t let your voice become alarming to Debbie, Erin, and Heather.” And while I tried my best to pull that off, my insides were absolutely a mess. Nothing but questions and scenarios raced through my head. How do we search for her, and for how long? What would we tell St. Vincent’s Hospital, where she is a therapy dog? How would this affect our family dynamics with Debbie’s parents? If we never found her, how would we find closure for us as a family? Nothing but the worst of situations filled my mind.

And then, about 20 minutes from their house, I got the following text from Debbie’s dad: “Ethel finally showed up. Looks fine – no worse for wear. Can’t say the same for us.” Out of nowhere, Ethel was sitting outside their front door barking, ready to come back inside from her great adventure. I have often said that she is the dumbest smart dog I have ever known! You can imagine our reaction when we got to their house. We did not want to let go of Ethel, as we realized that – very truly – what we once thought was lost, had now been found.

The parable of the prodigal son is more than familiar to us. It transcends the church and culture. We hear the phrase “prodigal son” used in movies, by the media, and elsewhere in modern culture. It is a story that elicits images of rebirth and new life, of someone failing miserably and then returning to glory. In the church, it has often been

couched in terms of welcoming the lost and getting over our “big sibling” tendency to judge and reject the one who is now shown immeasurable love. Indeed, I’m sure I could find several sermons in my past where I implored us to not be like the older brother, and be more like the father, welcoming the lost, younger siblings around us.

Today, though, I am drawn to what it means to be lost and then to be found. What does it mean for us to be welcomed unconditionally as the prodigal son, even when we more readily identify ourselves with the older sibling in the parable? What does it mean to have love shown to us in a way that speaks to the depth of how much we mean to that person? What does it mean to be truly lost, and then to be found – and loved – by the Lord our God?

The parable of the prodigal son does not stand on its own in this chapter from Luke’s Gospel. It is one of three parables that Jesus tells in chapter 15 about finding something that had previously been lost. He speaks of a shepherd who goes out to find the one lost sheep out of a hundred, and when that sheep is found, he invites his neighbors and family to share in his rejoicing (15:3-7). He speaks of a woman, who having lost one of her ten silver coins, scours her house diligently until she finds it. And upon finding that one coin, “she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost’” (15:9). In both cases, Jesus correlates these searches for lost items to God’s persistent love for the lost of this world. “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (15:10).

Jesus then tells this story about God’s persistent love that is not compared to finding a lost animal or object, but to a lost child. Emily Heath writes: *This week’s Gospel text is the story of a son who asks for his inheritance early, goes off to the big city, and promptly hits rock bottom. He is so afraid of how his father will be ashamed of him that he takes a job feeding pigs for a stranger. One day out in the fields, hungry and humiliated, he realizes that even his father’s hired hands are treated better than this. So he sets off for home, expecting no welcome but hoping for just enough grace to be treated fairly as a servant, not a son. He is, after all, a disappointment . . .*

It is unfortunate that it has become almost a cliché for pastors to preach this text by focusing mostly on the brother who stays behind. He’s the one whose righteous anger is so familiar to all of us who value loyalty and hard work. And yes, this brother should get his due; he lives in each of us.

But so does the other brother. So many of us, even those of us with good jobs and impressive résumés, walk around thinking that we are disappointments to someone we love. Too often, not even our churches let us be the fallen brother who desperately wants to come home. Too often, even in the one place where we should be able to

confess our failings and be honest with ourselves, we have to play the part of the one whose greatest sin is his desire for fairness . . .

We have all disappointed everyone who has ever loved us, God included. That's real. But so is grace, and the thing about grace is that those moments of disappointment do not define us. Unless, of course, we are so scared of our loved ones' rejection that we choose to let them.

In Lent we are called home by a God who will come running down the road just to hold us once more. We turn away not from life but from those places in life where we are not true to the person God has created us to be. In this season we find that our failures are indeed real, but that God's love is so much bigger and better than we could have imagined

(The Christian Century, February 16, 2016, 19).

Can we honestly and genuinely see ourselves as the prodigal? Can we drop our pretenses, tear down the prideful walls we build for our so-called protection, and be loved by God for who we truly are? Can we confess that our shame, our disappointment, our sin, while real, does not define us as children of God? Can we allow our lost selves to be found by a God who comes running down the road, who comes across the dining room, and embraces us with love and grace and forgiveness?

In the worship planning resource we use for our hymnal, one of the hymns suggested for this passage from Luke is "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." That seemed quite odd to me, considering we are in the season of Lent, and not Advent or Christmas. It made me wonder if someone had drunk a bit too much eggnog in putting this together. That is, until I read the words.

"Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild, *God and sinners reconciled!*"

And from verse 3: "Mild he lays his glory by, *born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth*"

(my italics, Glory to God, Hymn #119).

Our sin, our brokenness, our pride, our shame – it has all been reconciled by God's love in Jesus Christ. When we can confess our need for such grace, then we no more may die, granted a second birth as the prodigal received. When we admit that we are lost, then we are found in the shadow of the cross, and the hope of the empty tomb.

For, as we profess in our denomination's A Brief Statement of Faith: "Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still" (Book of Confessions, PC(USA)).

Thanks be to God. Amen.