

“STEP 1: KNOW YOU’RE LOST”

Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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I love the Bible. I really do. I can point to story after story that delights me or challenges me, that speaks to me when I am sad or makes me hopeful despite myself. I have been accused of having fifty favorite Bible stories, and maybe there’s some truth to that; but honestly, if I had to claim just one section of the New Testament and call it my favorite, it would be the piece Nancy read for us today: The 15th chapter of Luke, the chapter of the lost and found parables. I don’t know if locating these three parables of Jesus together was Luke’s doing or if Jesus actually dared speak them all at one time. But they are brilliant, all of them individually, and putting the three together building blocks on a common theme well, some might call it overkill, but sometimes overkill is what’s necessary when you’re dealing with certain audiences.

The audience this day was a group of Pharisees who came to see Jesus not to hear him teach, but to teach him. Jesus, in the Pharisees’ minds, needed to learn that consorting with sinners was just not done. He was becoming an important rabbi. He needed to uphold the community’s standards. And those standards included a carefully developed hierarchy of value. Good people here in these three sections above the line; sinners, everybody else, way over there.

The Pharisees came and shared their concerns with Jesus. In response, Jesus told them three parables, three stories that on the surface seemed to speak directly to the Pharisees’ issues about “sinner and righteous” and “lost and found”; but as the stories roll out, the ground beneath them is transformed and the very words lost, found, sinner, righteous are realigned and redefined.

The first story, the parable of the lost sheep, you have to read it carefully to understand it’s meant to be ambiguous, ironic. A good shepherd leaves his 99 well-behaved sheep and goes out to find the one lost. So God seeks the lost and outcast. Pretty standard prophetic theology until the punch line: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.” It’s the kind of line that goes right by you until you think about it. How many of you here know even one person who has no need of repentance? And that’s exactly the point. Even the most self-righteous of Pharisees would have to allow, for form if nothing else, that he might have committed some minor peccadillo for which he must repent. So what’s the real status of those 99 who supposedly need no repentance? Who’s really lost and who found? Can you see it? Jesus is beginning to blur the line of righteous and sinner, lost and found.

He follows up with the story of the lost coin which is an outrage if we look at it closely. Maybe one can divide the world of humans and sheep into good and bad, righteous and sinner but coins? Coins are coins; they have no intrinsic value. The only value a coin has comes from what we ascribe to it. It’s nonsense to think or talk about “sinner coins” and “righteous coins.” They’re all just coins. Though one might ignore the irony in the sheep parable, one cannot doubt Jesus’ intention here. The woman, the householder, she values all her coins not differentially on a hierarchical scale of values, not for what they have done or not done, but solely because of the value she puts on them.

Brief parable though this is, it is one of Jesus’ most shocking. God values us, not on a scale of what we’ve accomplished or the level of our piety, not because we’re good or smart or hard-working, but simply because we are. There is no hierarchy of value among God’s coins; we aren’t told of greater

coins or lesser coins, good coins or bad coins, only lost and not lost coins. Are you beginning to see the point here?

Can you see how it totally upends the standards of valuing and judging so dear to the heart of the Pharisees, and, one might add, not only the Pharisees?

But in case the Pharisees or we missed the point, we go on to the third parable the parable of the lost son and the found son. And if you have been paying attention, you know immediately that the son who is lost all along is in fact the older brother. The younger brother is there primarily as model for the older to show how reconciliation happens. The sins of the younger brother, yes, they are significant and obvious, but the story makes the older brother's sins equally clear pettiness, jealousy, judgment, condescension, not enough of charity, a lack of compassion. The story ends with the younger brother found begging the father's forgiveness only to find that it is love and love only that is the basis of relationship between him and the father. The older brother he's left standing alone in the dark while everyone else is celebrating at the feast. It's an open question whether he will ever put away his jealousy and bitterness, the pettiness and entitlement all that separates him from the Father—and go inside with a loving and joyful heart. “You are always with me,” says the father. “Everything that is mine is yours.” But that is often not enough for older brothers. They want more. They want better.

They want it to be a competition. They want the hierarchy, not grace enough for all.

Now I know I've spent a lot of time on these stories, but one of the things I wanted to accomplish this morning was just to try to show you how subtle and surprising these stories are.

When I learned them in Sunday school, I was told they were about God being good enough to love even “bad” people not, of course, that I would ever be one of those. Instead, they're about the radical freedom of God's love which values all and will distinguish between none. They're about how all those who are truly found approach relationship with God not as a promotion to be earned, but as gift which comes solely from the grace and love of the giver.

So what do we learn from this, we and I think that's most of us here we who are older brothers, and more like the Pharisees than we want to admit? I think these parables invite us to reflect on the gravity of “older brother” kinds of sins. Most of us would never consider “big” sins like stealing or assault or murder, or even frittering away our inheritances. But we do, too often, divide persons as “like us” or “not like us,” or as more deserving and less deserving. We divide people into categories of those of more consequence, those of less consequence, and those of no consequence at all. We can be self-righteous; we can be greedy; we can be jealous and petty and lacking in compassion. We think of ourselves first and others later. We neglect to live our lives thankfully, generously, and lovingly. These are older brother sins all of them. And they have serious and far-reaching consequences in every aspect of our lives, from our most intimate relationships to our contribution to the body politic. How can we say that our self-righteousness, our jealousy, or our unwillingness to let go of what is petty do not poison our personal lives? Can we truly claim that our sense of our own entitlement, and our inability to see the others God loves as equal to us have not made us less willing than we should be to change our lives and use our resources to relieve the suffering of millions on our planet?

These aren't small sins. They take us very far from home, and ultimately leave us alone in the dark while others feast and rejoice.

Jesus held a mirror to the Pharisees' faces, and they went away angry and began to plot to kill him. We can make a different choice. God still stands before us, promising, "You are always with me. All that I have is yours." If that can be enough for us, then we will be transformed, and food and drink, and music and dancing, and most of all great joy will be ours. Come join the feast. Thanks be to God. Amen.