

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Richard Rohr said “Jesus tried to change people by loving and healing them. His harshest words of judgement were reserved for those who perpetuated systems of inequality and oppression and who through religion itself thought they were sinless and untouchable.”

Today we have a very familiar parable and one of my favorites! I preach to myself here...who's the parable about?

And who is Jesus addressing here!?

Very simply -There was a father who had two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance, receives it, leaves home and squanders it all. He returns home and to his surprise, his Dad receives him with open arms. And this really angers his older brother! The story closes with the father appealing to his firstborn son to join the feast in welcoming the return of his younger brother...For that which was lost has been found! It doesn't seem too complex but it is like looking at the surface of a still deep lake. It's what's underneath that matters.

Parables were meant to disturb us. If you aren't uncomfortable, you probably aren't getting it. This is the parable not of one but of TWO lost sons! And much of what has informed my sermon today comes directly from an amazing book diving deep into this parable...The Prodigal God by Timothy Keller.

So let's dive in!

Prodigal is an adjective meaning “recklessly extravagant”. And this describes the father more than the younger brother. God extravagantly and recklessly pours upon us grace upon grace even when we get turned around or become lost!

Each brother here represents the different ways we can all stray from God. Remember two different groups were here listening to Jesus...tax collectors and sinners (the younger brother)...And the Pharisees and Teachers (the older brother)...and by the way sisters aren't off the hook either.

It is to this second group that Jesus is directing this parable to...that would be us!

The target of the parable is not the lost sinners (see they got it)...the folks that had the hardest time getting Jesus' message were the ones living moral lives and following all the rules...just like most of us do!

Jesus' story reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother, but also condemns the older brother's moralistic life - interesting. Jesus is actually saying that both the non-religious and religious can become spiritually lost. Remember with Jesus - It's always what's on the inside that counts! What's that hiding in your heart?!

It's hard to believe that when Christianity was first practiced, they were actually called atheists by the Romans...see they had no priests, they made no sacrifices, and they had no temples...early Christians believed that this was all encompassed in Jesus the Christ...the Christians were anti-religious! This is certainly lost on us today. Jesus' teachings constantly attracted the sinners and marginalized and often offended the Bible believing, religious people of his day.

Now let's go a little deeper!

The first scene is shocking! The younger son asks for his share of his inheritance which would be the same as asking his father to be dead! The original listeners knew that a double portion went to the eldest son...and the younger would get a third of the estate which ONLY would have been divided at the father's death.

This would have been unbelievable! But the father's response is even more unbelievable! He would have had to sell off much of his assets to give the son that which he desired. So the father literally tears his own life apart for the love of a son who just wished him to be dead! Wow!

The son then falls as low as one could, surviving in the mud with unclean pigs. He acknowledges that he has given up his birth right. By Jewish law he has disgraced his family...therefore the son's strategy would be to live outside the estate as a servant where he could work and pay back the debt to his family. That was his plan anyway.

When the son comes into view his father runs to meet him...runs! A Middle Eastern patriarch would never run. His emotions are openly being shown here.

As the son attempts to speak, his father interrupts him and puts the best robe on him and a ring...which would have been the father's way of symbolically restoring his standing with the father and the family. Then he kills the calf...meat only reserved for special events. And no meat was more expensive! What a scene! What a radical, extravagant prodigal message.

That God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore every kind of sin! It doesn't matter what you have done! There is no match for the father's prodigal grace poured out upon His children...you can easily see why this was GOOD NEWS to the outcasts...there was still hope for them...this is why the sinners and lost were so attracted to Jesus!

Now when the older brother hears of this he becomes furious. Now it's his turn to disgrace his father. He refuses to go to the biggest event his father has ever put on – publicly criticizing his father's actions.

This forces the father to go out to him - again demeaning himself. The older son is very upset. His wayward brother has now gained the right to one third of the father's remaining estate! Do the math! Again unbelievable!

As he adds things up, he see that his younger sibling has done nothing to earn anything...where's the consequences! He broke all the rules and is rewarded with more of what the elder brother considered rightfully his!

The brother then tells the father that the He had NO right to make this decision. In his fury he insults the father again by saying Look You! This behavior would have been humiliating. So how does the father respond? Once again with amazing tenderness...he challenges his son to swallow his pride and return with him to the feast... Jesus' listeners would have been on edge waiting to see if the family would reunite...and just as we come to the climax of the story...it ends.

Why?

See this story was intended for the Pharisees, the rule keepers, and it is they that now need to respond personally to Jesus' invitation. Jesus is redefining sin, and what it might mean to be lost.

Jesus uses the two brothers to portray the two basic ways people seek happiness in and fulfillment in life: the way of moral conformity and the way of self-discovery.

The older brother represents putting the will of God and the standards of the community ahead of their own fulfillment...in this view we achieve happiness and a world made right by following the rules.

The younger brother represents the path of self-discovery. People free to pursue their dreams. In this view, the world would be a better place if tradition, prejudice, hierarchy, authority and other barriers to personal freedom were gone.

And our own society is so deeply divided between these two approaches that hardly anyone can see it any other way. Liberal and Conservative thought...Each of these ways of thinking tends to divide the world into two groups (that's dualism). The message in Jesus' parable is that BOTH these approaches are often off target...and Jesus points us to a radical alternative. A third way of thinking!

In the parable we tend to label one brother as Bad and the other as Good but BOTH, BOTH have strayed from their father's love. In the unbelievable conclusion the lover of prostitutes is saved, but the man of moral standing is lost...this makes no sense!...How can this be?

The elder brother is not losing his father's love because of his goodness... it's in spite of it...it's his pride...his own self-righteousness gets in the way.

Ahhh let's go deeper...Now the two brothers' HEARTS are EXACTLY the same.

Both wanted, not a relationship with their father, but rather both wanted their father's property and wealth (their just reward). Different means to the same end! Neither son loved the father for himself; the relationship...both used the father for their own self-centered ends...and one can rebel against God either way!

So sin then is not just about keeping God's laws. It's about a separation from God reflected in your heart...why would you need a savior if you can just follow all the rules and save yourself! In fact can't you just avoid Jesus altogether by living a good moral life...then God owes you in the end! And you have the tally sheet to prove it.

It was the status, wealth and power... not his father's love, the relationship, that the older brother believed would make him happy and fulfilled.

If you seek to control God through your obedience, then all your morality is just another way of using God to get the life you want...the life you deserve... the life you have earned!

Nearly everyone defines sin as breaking a list of rules. Jesus shows us that many people who live by the rules are also spiritually lost – you just can't see it. Sin is not just about breaking rules (as younger brothers do), but sin is also about putting yourself first in the place of God...you become Savior, Lord and Judge.

Yet even though both sons are lost...the father STILL cares for them both and invites them both back into his love and into the feast...BTW the end of the Bible ends with an invitation to a feast.

The Gospel message that Jesus taught was not something halfway between two extremes – it is something else altogether. In this message everyone is a sinner, everyone is loved, and everyone is called to examine and change their hearts. There are no (bad people) the out group... and (good people) the in group!

If anything, Jesus says the humble are in and the proud are out. Recognizing the need for God in your brokenness is obvious, but not so obvious is the need for God to those who are blinded by their own self-righteousness and moral high ground.

Jesus often talks of salvation under the metaphor of lost and found. What does it mean to be spiritually lost?

The younger brother's lost-ness is clear, but the older-brother lost-ness is not so obvious. I myself have lived both as the younger brother and the elder brother ...you see it's what's underneath – what's in your heart that Jesus is trying to reach.

Elder brothers can exhibit anger and resentment. Elder brothers believe that if they live a good life, then they deserve a good life. Elder brothers who don't live up to their own standards can be filled with self-loathing. Elder brothers have a hard time handling suffering.

The good life is not lived for joy but as a calculated way to control things. Elder brothers expect their goodness to pay off. Elder brothers also have a strong sense of their own superiority, they base their self-images on being hardworking, or moral, or members of an elite group, or extremely smart and savvy.

Elder brother self-righteousness can create racism and classism; and creates an unforgiving judgmental spirit as well.

An elder brother's spirit is joyless, fear-based compliance. And Honesty born of fear does nothing to root out the fundamental cause of evil in our world – the intense self-centeredness in the human heart. Elder brothers may do good for others, but not out of delight or for the love of those they are serving. They are not really feeding and clothing the hungry but rather themselves! Underneath it all is a great veiled self-centeredness! It's what's in your heart that matters to Jesus not your outward actions.

The elder brothers of the world are by far the most dangerous lot. Jesus needs them to look at themselves in the mirror...this is why the parable is told in such a way to the Pharisees and then left open ended. Elder brothers don't go to God and beg for reconciliation...they are blind to their own shortcomings. See one can easily see when a younger brother gets lost! But when an elder brother becomes lost its hidden on the inside.

Jesus is showing us both extremes to disturb every one of His listeners.

So what's the Point? How do we find an alternative to our particular brand of lostness? (Now we have reached the bottom)...Well we find it when we realize that Jesus deliberately left someone out of the parable...a true older brother...an elder brother with the right heart...a true and loving seeker of the lost!

Notice how the father comes out to each son and expresses his love for them, in order to bring them back - God is reaching out to us!

Luke placed this parable in a grouping of three parables on lost-ness. The lost sheep and the lost coin preceded this...in both parables the seeker drops everything and seeks that which is lost in order to restore wholeness!

Jesus' listeners knew the Torah inside out. In the story of the first brothers - Cain and Abel, God tells the resentful and proud elder brother: YOU are your brother's keeper. The elder brother in the parable should have sought his lost brother...For it is ONLY at the elder brother's expense that the younger brother is truly reconciled.

Mercy and forgiveness ALWAYS come at a price to the one granting the forgiveness. The younger brother's restoration was free to him, but it came at enormous cost to the elder brother. There is no other way.

But Jesus does not put a true older brother in the parable. One who would be willing to pay ANY price to seek and save one who was lost. The younger son in the parable instead got a self-centered Pharisee for a brother - not Jesus!

Jesus is our big brother who would pay any cost to seek us out and bring us back into God's Holy family. Our true elder brother paid our debt upon a cross to bring us back into relationship with our prodigal God...A God who recklessly pours out Grace upon Grace and unconditional Love and acceptance upon ALL of us...ALL God's - children.

For we have all been lost...but we have now been found! ...and that is good news indeed! Come, Come Join the Feast!

Your faithful servant,

carmen