

“Straying From the Path”

Worship Resources

Lent 4, Year C,

31st March, 2019

Luke 15:1-10 NRSV / Luke 15:11-32 NRSV

How many of us like the feeling of being lost?

That sense of being separated from what is familiar and safe,
and finding ourselves surrounded by the unknown.

For most, it can be a harrowing experience.

Some of us handle the unknown better than others,

but I don't think any really relish the thought

of dealing with being truly lost for any sustained length of
time.

But I think it's also important to realize that there are many ways we can define
“being lost.”

Certainly being in an unknown location is the obvious one that often
springs to mind,

such as the sheep in our picture here.

Being in a place that's unfamiliar, and not knowing how to find one's way
back

to what is familiar and gives us a sense of security would be unsettling.

Modern technology certainly helps us avoid

this type of location-based “lost” much of the time now.

But there still exist places in this world

without a cell signal and Google maps,

places where we can still find ourselves “lost.”

But we can also find ourselves lost in other ways,

Sometimes we can find ourselves immersed in a culture

that is so radically different from our own

that we don't know how we are supposed to speak and

act,

in fact, we may not even know the predominant language

being spoken.

One may think that only happens when traveling to other countries,

but we are a country made up of many cultures.

In this very sanctuary, later today,

people will be worshipping in two different

languages,

with accompanying worship styles that I'm sure
differ significantly from what we are used to.

We wouldn't have that same comfort level and sense of
security

in knowing what to say or do and when to do it,
as we do in our "home" church service.

But one can also be "lost" in the middle of a crowd of people
who do speak the same language
and have roughly the same cultural background.

Many who suffer from depression or grief can feel lost and
alone

in a crowded party of people.

Sadly, in every culture throughout human history,
there also always seem to be those who are the "in" crowd,
those who have the power and privileges that come
with being in the majority group,
or the group with the most power in a situation.

And when you have a defined "in" crowd,
you have a group or groups of people who are the "outcasts."

Which is where we meet Jesus today in our parables.

The religious leaders of his culture had become very critical of his habit of eating and associating with “sinners.”

And it's important to take a moment to understand

what is meant by the term “sinner” in this context.

When we hear that word, often what comes to mind

is someone who makes poor moral choices,

who lives a life of crime or has a rampant sex life.

But let's keep in mind that there is always an “in” crowd

who defines what is considered “out.”

From the Pharisees and scribes' perspective,

anybody who was not an observant Jew

and did not follow the 600 odd laws found in the Torah

was a “sinner.”

Anybody who suffered from chronic illness

often was considered unclean and a “sinner.”

And anybody who associated in anyway with these

“outcasts”

was also guilty of being unclean and a “sinner.”

“Sinner” was pretty much a blanket term for anybody

who didn't fit into their definition of being “in.”

So in response to this criticism, Jesus tells three different parables with similar themes:

the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin,
and the Parable of the Prodigal Son

all involve the recovery of something or someone who had been lost.

But not only finding the lost,

but the restoration of what was lost all done in great and grand
celebration.

All three stories also show the tremendous grace of the main character
in tirelessly seeking what had been lost.

Certainly that is the obvious moral on the surface to all these stories,

that of grace being shown to the lost among us,

and Jesus making the point that he is sent to find those who are lost,

not glorify those already “found.”

In fact, it could be argued that he is giving a backhanded invitation

to the religious teachers in the crowd

to join him in working outside the fold with the lost.

But as also is the case with the parables that Jesus shared,

there are multiple levels to be looked at and considered.

There is the surface message, grace in this case,

but many other meanings as we look a little deeper.

The people in the crowd listening to Jesus telling these parables,

particularly the final one on the Prodigal Son,

would realize the sacrifice involved in the main character's search

for that which was lost.

First century Palestine, not unlike modern Palestine,

is a largely honor-based, patriarchal culture.

In other words, the elder male of the family

is the uncontested ruler of that family structure

and showing that elder respect was probably the key feature

of how order is maintained in that system.

If we think about our parable of the Prodigal Son from that perspective,

the father in that story is continually disrespected at every turn.

First we have the younger son requesting his share of the family

estate

while the father is still alive and well.

This act is disrespectful on a couple of levels.

For one, to have the gall to ask for one's inheritance

while the father still exists.

But from a land-based cultural standpoint,

you disrespect the larger Jewish population,
who are committed to clinging to the land
gifted to them by God.

In order for the son to squander his inheritance in a
foreign land,

the implication would be

that he sold his part of the family homestead
to finance his reckless behavior.

Not only did the father suffer this slight directly from his son,

but he would face the dishonor in his community

by tolerating this impudence

which resulted in the loss of part of their ancestral

property.

The cultural expectation would be that he would subsequently disown that son,

yet he again swallows his pride and goes against the cultural grain

by welcoming his son back with open arms and throwing a great
party.

Now we see that act on the surface as him expressing his great joy

in his lost son's return.

But there's a deeper implication as well.

He knows the deep embarrassment and shame
that his son's behavior has caused the community,
and by throwing this great feast and hosting the neighbors,
he can help begin to build bridges
between the community and his lost son,
enabling that son to start to reconnect with the
community
that would have shunned him.

Entering into this scene is the petulant older son,
whose refusal to attend the party leads the father to walk away from his
guests,
yet another serious cultural faux pas,
and attempt to bring his older son into the celebration
to ensure the brother's continued honor and acceptance.

This whole honor thing gets very complicated, doesn't it?

But that is the point being made, that Jesus' audience would pick up these
nuances up

when they gave this parable some deeper thought.

They would realize that the father sacrificed continually

to show his love not only for the prodigal son,

but also for the faithful son who had his own share of
arrogance as well.

The father repeatedly risked becoming outcast himself
to show love and compassion to his own lost sons.

As we've been looking at these parables throughout Lent,
we've intentionally been looking at them from angles not usually taken,
and these parables are no exceptions.

What if we look at this theme of seeking out the lost and gone astray
as a call to us to go astray ourselves to seek those who are the outcasts,
the "sinners" of today?

How does that change the meaning we get from these parables?

Like the religious structure of Jesus' day,
Christianity has created its own "in" crowd, and likewise,
it's own wide array of outcasts.

It seems that almost daily our own cultural leadership, religious and
secular,

find new people to scapegoat and exclude:

immigrants and asylum seekers,

the homeless and low income,

people of color, Muslims, Jews,

and of course as always, the LGBT community.

How much do those on the outside,

see us as those Pharisees of old, full of judgment and exclusion,

not extending the same welcome to conversation and table

fellowship

that Jesus went out of his way to extend?

The lesson we can take from this parable may be

that we need to take an honest look at our own situation, right here, right

now.

Who is it that we exclude or feel excluded by the powers of this

world?

Like the father in our parable, are there those in our own family

that we treat differently,

because we see them as the Prodigal ones,

the lost sheep in our flock?

We hear so much about the increase of the “nones” and the “spiritual but not religious,”

those who feel no allegiance to a religion or particular faith,

often because of the alienation and quite frankly, bigotry they

experience,

whether out in the open,
or cleverly disguised in the experiences they've had
with bodies of believers.

(you know, the “hate the sin, love the sinner”
crowd.)

How can we step outside the fold and be present with those who are the
outcasts today?

Even those we may disagree with?

How can we be like the father in our parable

and see the human face of those who challenge our sense of honor and
respect,

and yet we run to with the best robe and ring,

and celebrate their existence without judgment?

That's the challenge we face as members of the body of Christ in today's world.

If the outcasts aren't comfortable coming to us,

then how do we overcome our discomfort to be with them exactly where
they are,

without any expectations or preconditions?

What is our witness and what can our witness be?

May we seek God's guidance and wisdom and seek to the paths

that take us astray from the “in” crowd of today,

into the margins where God is always present and at work.

If we fail to seek the lost, then we won't find God in this place, will we?

May our hearts lead us astray to be the outcasts we are called to be. Amen.