

## Worship Service - *“Lost and Found”*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C,

27th March, 2022

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

### Prelude

**Gospel Opening** (Video) [Siyahamba \(We Are Marching in the Light of God\)](#)

Symphony Of Human Rights

Posted to YouTube by Andreas Schmidt-Hartmann. More info at:

<http://symphony-of-human-rights.com/>

### Welcome Guests / Announcements

#### Pass the Peace

**Opening Hymn**                      *What is This Place*                      1

#### Call to Worship

One: We walk by faith, not by sight;

**All: For the love of Christ urges us on.**

One: If we are in Christ,

**All: We are a new creation.**

One: Everything old has passed away;

**All: Everything has become new!**

One: Come, enter this time of worship:

**All: May we be renewed in our spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

#### Invocation (Resources)

O God, with gladness and expectation, we gather in this space today.

For you are the one who makes all things new.

You are the one who satisfies our hunger and restores our soul.

In this holy space, help us, your daughters and sons,  
to know that you always love us.

Through our worship today,

help us to know that if we stray away from you,

you are always ready to receive us with open arms.

Prepare our hearts as we worship you

to welcome and embrace all of your children as you do us.

With gladness and expectation we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

## Gospel Reading - Luke 15:1-10 NSRV

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.

.”So he told them this parable:

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

**Hymn**

*Amazing Grace*

**143**

## Joys and Concerns

### **Pastoral Prayer** (Resources)

Loving God may we be found and may we find a place called home a place where faith holds us and grace renews us where forgiveness longs for us to be who you will us to be

may we find a place called home where we are accepted as we are where we are taken in and loved unconditionally

a place called home where we belong and our souls fit and our questions are Allowed and our anger is heard and our needs are recognised and our pain is Held and our names are known

and may this be that place, O God, this community this group of travelers and doubters and companions on the way

this home where your place is our place and place isn't a building but a way of being

together in relationship held together by love

Loving God Homecoming God may we make this a home to all who still yet seek  
a place of grace-filled sanctuary and gracious welcome

So be it Amen

## **Gospel Lesson      Luke 15:11-32 NRSV**

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons.

The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'

## **Message – “Lost and Found”**

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, today, people will be worshiping in 4 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 is 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 LGBTQ+ 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?

As we continue to discern our mission and calling as a congregation, let's ask ourselves, what is our witness and what can our witness be? May we seek God's guidance and wisdom and seek 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 will we still find God in this place? May our hearts lead us astray to be the outcasts we are called to be. Amen.

## **A Call to Serve**

Brothers and sisters, we have been called to manifest God's righteousness and to be ambassadors of Christ's love. Let us take time to consider this morning how we can be those ambassadors, using our gifts of finance, time, and prayer to further God's loving mission in this world.

## **A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude***

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

Thank you, O God, for loving us and laboring with us  
as we seek you and as we help others in their seeking.  
Bless these offerings which we return to you,  
that in our seeking and our serving,  
we may help others to feel the embrace of your and our wide welcome.  
Guide us in your wisdom and love that we may use these gifts  
to manifest your righteousness in the world in all that we do. Amen.

## **BENEDICTION** (resources)

God sends us forth,  
to be reconcilers of the broken and oppressed.  
Jesus, our Brother, sends us to welcome everyone.  
May we embrace the prodigals with joy,  
and make a feast for all of God's people.  
The Spirit sends us with arms full of healing.  
to bring hope to all we meet. Amen

(adapted from a blessing written by Thom Shuman and posted on Lectionary Liturgies)

## **Postlude**