

Lost and Found

Genesis 1:26-28; Luke 1:1-3, 13-32

Early in our marriage my wife and I lived in the San Fernando Valley of LA. One night we were trying to find the Fly Away to LAX. This was before the era of GPS's and smart phones. The pickup point we were looking for was in Van Nuys. The San Fernando Valley is grid-like in its roads, like the City of San Bernardino across the wash. The roads are straight and due north, south, east and west. Many of the streets have similar sounding names. Although I had been to the Flyaway once or twice before, this time I could not find it. I got angrier and angrier—I'm good with maps (I was an artillery officer!), I thought—but there was no getting around the fact: I was lost.

All of us have been lost at one time or another. When we get lost we have one of two reactions—mad or sad. I was mad. When the younger brother “came to his senses” after he had only the carob pods to eat that were for the pigs, he was not mad, but sad. He decided to admit that he was lost, and go to the only place he knew—home.

When I was lost that night in the Valley I made a whole lot of bad turns. I turned left when I should have turned right, mistook one street for another; and I became lost all with the best of intentions. I just did what I thought was right at the time. With the aid of my calm wife, it took me a while to come to my senses. The anger and embarrassment helped me come to my senses, and then I became open to relying on home, my mystified wife who wondered why I was so angry.

In our story, some might say the younger brother only got what he deserved. He ignored the advice of his financial advisor! He did not put three months of living expenses in an emergency fund. He confused his wants for his needs. He lived recklessly. You and I have received a lot of advice about how we should live—from our parents, our teachers, our friends, our culture, our church. But sometimes we ignore it all and do what we think is right. Ignoring advice isn't all bad. It just sometimes we have to pay for it.

What did the poet Frost say, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. [<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/r/robertfros100246.html>] ”? Sometimes we don’t know what we’ll find at home—rejection or acceptance. Sometimes we don’t even know if we can find it again. We’ve gone to a very distant country, and learned new ways. Sometimes we think we’ll be treated with what I call “infantilization”—in my case I’m Tommy instead of Tom to my cousins, or ignorance—they’ll say, “Isn’t it always sunny in southern California?” But when you’re desperate or even just miss them, you take your chances.

The younger brother learns that going home is both a surprise and a relief. The father’s attitude makes it so. It’s a surprise because he thought he was going to be a hired hand. He had already received his inheritance--what he deserved. Instead he’s welcomed as a son. It’s a relief because first thing in the door he got to eat. He was met not with grief but acceptance, in fact celebration.

Chris asked a great question at this past week’s Sunrise Morning Prayer; With whom do you identify in this story? Here are our choices: We can identify with the Pharisees and religious experts who grumbled or murmured like the children of Israel in the wilderness. Or we can identify with the younger son. Or we can identify with the father who “lets it all hang out.” Or we can identify with the elder brother who is sure he’s right, and honorable. Put yourself into the story.

I’m identifying with the younger brother. Perhaps you as individuals and you as a church do, too. Even though the younger brother chose a life of “dissolute living”, it got out of control. *The 40 days of Lent is a journey about getting in touch with how much is done to us—how much is out of our control--and the best we can do is to come to our senses and make our way home.*

Ezra’s a friend of mine with whom our family shares Christmas dinner each year. His day job is promoting feature length movies for the large distribution companies. He principally uses social media and digital advertising to try to get people to watch the movies he’s promoting. Over dinner one year we asked him, what works best? He said, “The truth is nobody knows nothing. We keep trying a variety of means, and sometimes they work, and sometimes they don’t.” Tonight

is the last Downton Abbey after six seasons, and tens of awards. Nobody knows nothin'. Who would have thought a British soap opera about life in the teens and 20's among the wealthy and their servants would be such a hit? I believe it's the same way in life. Much of life, even in God's world, is unknown and unpredictable.

The way to life in all its fullness is by following the younger son. First, we come to our senses. Who knows what does it? I believe it's grace. I've suggested that grace takes the form of pain for adults—psychic or relational pain usually. But grace shows up in other ways too: a conversation with a friend, a word or line from a poem or prose that shimmers, or a realization that you're in much deeper than you thought.

This is the great mystery in working with the homeless. As I converse with them they seem to have endless and unrealistic plans for becoming what my school-teacher father called a productive member of society. But they haven't gone low enough yet. They die younger; they have more chronic health problems; and maybe their only happiness is freedom from not having bosses, family and society in the form of bankers and shopkeepers telling them how much it will be, and what they can buy. But they are not eating the pods of the pigs. They haven't come to their senses.

Whether it's pain, insight or sheer grit, it's all grace, that's the first step to coming to our senses.

Second, we go home. We don't think of God as our eternal home. Most of us posit great difference between God and us as in Barth's famous line "God is God and we are not." We may even posit judgment upon God. But Genesis tells us we are made in the image and likeness of God. God is our parent. We come from God, and we return to God. We can debate until the cows come home what the image and likeness consists of. But image and likeness certainly says that this sense of distance we feel from God and ourselves is *illusory*. We are only fully ourselves when we're reflecting the image. That's why the real star of this story is the Father. He is the hinge, and the person we need to imitate in his great generosity, his anxious waiting, his foolish running after a son whom he sees from

afar, his fetching of a robe and a ring and party orders, and the honesty with which he meets the older son's scorn. Home is where God is, and God is very good, most loving and kind.

We come to our senses, we go home, and we join the party. Presbyterian Christians are not known as party animals. But Lenten Soup Suppers and a Sunday Anne will be announcing shortly tell me that we are most ourselves when we are singing and dancing.

I know it's a stretch for most of us to consider the Lord's Supper a party. Because it's usually done with such solemnity and reminder of Jesus' difficult death that we think we should be crying instead of laughing. But as we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes we proclaim a happy death that won our freedom. We proclaim a Father's love that ordered his Son to be brought back from the dead. We proclaim that the world's evil is not the last word, but reunion and reconciliation is.

We come to our senses, we go home, and we join the party.

Here's a word from your pastor: I ask you to be patient with others as they try to make sense of their confusion. I ask you to give others the benefit of the doubt as they try different paths home. That applies in your family, in this church and between our congregations in this church, and with our friends.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, reflected on his own lost-ness alone in the forest of northern Kentucky. I suspect that his experience is much closer to ours than the younger brother's:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

When you and I get lost we come to our senses by remembering that the surest part of who we are is the One's whose image we share. It's your gift— from a Father's love. Gift is the simple way of saying the more theological word, grace— consistent, searching love. We will never be able to figure it out—sometimes it's so extravagant that it scandalizes the Pharisees and religious scholars among us. But as we come to our senses and find our way home a party awaits us that shall not disappoint. Come!