

February 12, 2017 (Journey Worship)

TEXT: Luke 15:11–32

TITLE: Back on Track

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

We've all been lost. Whether we like to admit it or not, it's true. We've crossed the wrong bridge to get to the West End; we've hiked an unfamiliar, unmarked trail where all the trees look alike; we've forgotten on which level of the parking garage we left our car; we've even forgotten where we come from—our background, our roots, our sense of purpose, our sense of who we are. Being lost is part of the human experience.

Every time my husband and I visit friends in Philadelphia we get lost. We know it will happen, and so we don't get too stressed about it anymore. In fact, the only way that we can get to our friend's house now—even in this day of iPhones equipped with Google maps—is to get lost. It is how we get our bearings. Only once we notice the place where we got lost before, can we find our way out, retracing our former missteps until we can get back on track.

Isn't that how life works sometimes? We find ourselves trapped in the same cycle of getting lost. We start our diet with the best of intentions, until we pass the bakery section at Giant Eagle and buy the same crumb cake that we have eaten for breakfast for years. We make a spreadsheet with a solid budget for the New Year, and start out tracking our expenses—until we have three late nights at work in a row and find ourselves ordering take out all week, and we are miserably off course. We start a conversation with our spouse with the best of intentions—until we become convinced of our own correctness and forget that we are talking with someone that we love and trust, and with whom we are playing for the same team.

We easily get stuck in the rut of our old habits and lose sight of who we are and who we can be. The *wrong* choice becomes the *easiest* choice—the path of least resistance. And in our busyness we drift off course, with little energy or focus to keep ourselves on the most life-affirming path.

The parable we heard today is one that we've all heard before. We often know it by the fancy title of the parable of the prodigal son—but when we look at it's place in Luke's gospel, we see that the title “the parable of the lost son” is actually a better fit. Luke has dedicated the whole 15th chapter of his Gospel to stories of that which is lost being found—by a shepherd, by a woman, by a father.

When we look at this familiar passage in this context, we might realize that we have, like both sons in the passage, misplaced our focus at times too.

Son number one is the talk of the town. He is the one at the heart of all of the gossip—the one who asked for his share of father's inheritance while his father was still alive; the one who, basically, told his dad that he wished that he was dead. He is the one who squandered his father's wealth on parties, women, and sinful living. He is the one who

blew all of his cash and was starving—so hungry that he grew jealous of the slop being fed to the pigs.

Son number two is the one with whom we want to relate. He is the one who worked hard on his father's land. He had his father's back. He was loyal and true and dedicated to his labor. He did everything right—and, we later learn, was so committed to the script of his life and culture, that when mercy was shown to his younger brother he became self-righteous and jealous.

Both sons were, in there way, lost. One clearly lost his way—he left his home, his family; he left his identity and his future. He abandoned any sense of ethics he may have held in younger years; he rejected all that had been important to him. He rejected all who felt that he was worthy of love.

But the older son was lost too. He was so lost in his identity as a do-gooder and a people-pleaser that he forgot that he was loved. He forgot that his primary call wasn't to a robust to-do list each day, but to a relationship with his Dad—who loved him more than life itself. He was lost in a resume built upon all of the good that he had done, that he had forgotten who he was and whose he was—and that nothing, not even the return of his lost brother, could change that.

Like these sons, we often find ourselves among the lost whether we are lost or simply keeping their company. We know those who have gone astray based on their bad choices OR even their good intentions. We know this place—we live in it every day. We can point it out on our TV screens and we talk about it over coffee with our closest friends. Those who are lost captivate our attention—whether they make us feel better about ourselves as we stand on our firm grand, or whether they make us feel more confused, more uncertain and more afraid.

But commentators are quick to remind us that as much as the lost catch our attention, this parable is not so much about them, really. Getting lost is part of the mundane—it happens to dim-witted sheep and it happens to inert coins, just like it happens to us. *There is nothing exceptional about getting lost.* It doesn't take half a brain or even an ounce of breath to get lost. In this imperfect, fallen world, there is in some ways a gravitational pull toward the experience of being lost. It is why inventors have made money on leashes and metal detectors and GPS devices. Being lost is, well, NORMAL.

What is exceptional in our text is the one who is utterly committed to finding the lost. This person—the shepherd, the woman or the father—does not dismiss, write off or forget the lost. But this amazing character, in fact, *never* forgets, never lets go, never stops caring. This figure remains steadfast in their pursuit of what was lost—even seeming to prioritize the lost over all that remained. In their eyes, it was never acceptable that ANYTHING of ANYONE should be lost in the first place.

So, in our story, the father runs. He runs toward his son as soon as he is spotted in the distance. It seems as though he might have been looking out for him already, his gaze

fixed on the horizon always searching for his missing son. As soon as he is seen, the father sets out, lifting his skirt and running through town. A sight, as scholars remind us—unbefitting a Middle Eastern patriarch. His reckless pursuit of his son shames him in the eyes of the town. It is as if the father re-directs his son's shame onto himself. *HE is now the one the whole town is discussing. HE is the one to whom fingers are pointing.* The lost son is embraced and kissed before he even makes it home—restored to his family as his father's son, and not as a servant without honor.

Chapter 15 of Luke reminds us that God pursues God's people—even when it seems like a waste of time, even when it makes no sense, even when God's people have wronged God and have, essentially, spit in God's face. God does not turn outward in wrath or inward in self-righteousness. Rather, God loves. God pursues. God searches persistently. God welcomes with open arms. God runs toward us. God rejoices.

We worship a God whose love for us makes no sense—who claims us as God's own even when we get miserably lost. We worship a God who desires our found-ness, perhaps even more than we do ourselves. In a culture grounded in retributive justice and an ethic of picking one's own self up from our boot straps, we find this hard to wrap our heads around. But scripture assures us—not just once, but THREE TIMES in this chapter—*that this is how God works.*

This pursuing God welcomes us even when we are wearing the stain of our indiscretion and the shame of our convicted hearts. God welcomes us when we simply show up because we have no better place to go—even when we're not sure that we're sorry or that we would have done anything differently. God embraces us even when we stand on a pedestal and judge the world, certain of the strength of our character and the moral righteousness of our good choices. God finds us in our lost places and loves us, through and through.

So my question for you is this: Are you ready to be found? Are you ready to be embraced by a God who has and does love you? Are you ready for what that might mean to your identity? Are you ready for what change that might bring? Are you ready to let go of our insecurity and doubt and your need to be right? Are you ready to be honest about your faults and trust that you can be loved even still? Are you willing to surrender your plans and trust that you are still going to be ok, held in the loving grasp of a faithful God?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count. I have set out to be married and ended up divorced. I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. I have set out to live in New England and ended up in Georgia...

While none of these displacements was pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path...(so) I have decided to stop fighting the

prospect of getting lost and engage it as a spiritual practice instead. The Bible is a great help to me in this practice, since it reminds me that God does some of God's best work with people who are truly, seriously lost.¹

It is here, in our lost-ness, that we surrender our self-sufficiency. It is here, in our lost places that we shed the masks that we wear and our will to be in control. Like the faithful and unfaithful sons, it is only when we realize that we are lost that we learn to trust in the grace and steadfast care of our loving parent, who somehow finds a way to pull us close when we have lost our way.

We are never so lost that we fall outside of God's reach. There is nothing that we can do and nothing that can be done to us that will separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. When life seems impossible, when we don't know which way to turn, we just need to stop, look and listen: God will come to you, running, in fact—with arms open wide and calling out to you: "My precious child, I am here. I have loved you and always will."

Thanks be to God.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in the World*. P 73.