

March 27, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 15:1–32](#)

TITLE: Rest Stops: Coming to Ourselves

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

About 20 years ago, the poet Wislawa Szymborska won the Nobel Prize for literature. Here's one of her poems I like called "A Contribution to Statistics." *Out of a hundred people, those who know better – 52; those doubting every step – nearly all the rest. Glad to lend a hand if it doesn't take too long – as high as 49; always good because they can't be otherwise – four, well, maybe five. Able to admire without envy – 18. Living in constant fear of someone or something – 77. Capable of happiness – twenty-something tops. Cruel when forced by circumstances – better not to know even ballpark figures. Only taking things from life – 40 (I wish I were wrong). Hunched in pain – no flashlight in the dark – 83 sooner or later. Worthy of compassion – 99; mortal – a hundred out of a hundred. Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.*

Many years ago, Jesus told three parables about being lost and being found. And statistics seemed to play a part in each of them: One lost sheep out of a flock of 100; one misplaced silver coin out of a precious horde of 10; and a lost son from a small household of three. At first glance, the Prodigal Son is a story about statistics. One father, two sons—one stays home, one goes astray. Statistics suggest there's always a 50-50 chance of that. Two sons, one inheritance. By law, the elder will get 2/3rds of everything; the younger, the remaining 1/3. He unkindly asked for his portion early, took what was given, and walked away from home—from father, from brother, reducing everything by 33%.

At this point, some of you may be hoping I will go into details about what happened next—about what exactly the "dissolute living" was upon which the young man squandered his inheritance. I'm sorry to say that the scripture doesn't go into details here. Was it liquor or drugs or online gambling or a cryptocurrency Ponzi scheme? We're not told in detail, and rightly so. This parable was never truly a morality play. The prodigal son made bad choices and had bad luck; there was a famine; there was a series of unfortunate events. Basically a son unwisely left his home and then hit rock bottom. As human beings we want details and statistics: Should he have known better? How does he compare with his peer group? But as God watched the prodigal hit rock bottom, God only cared about one thing: What does he do next?

We're told that the young man is broke, hungry enough to want to eat the slop he's just fed the pigs. In that moment scripture says, "But when he came to himself..." That's got to be the pivotal moment. Or at least, a very important moment. He came to himself. He saw where he was, who he was, and what he was and knew he had to change. Remember when you used a small dial to tune your radio to radio stations. Sometimes the tuner wasn't set quite right, so the station came in badly, static-y, distorted. You needed to move the dial to the right spot to hear the music properly. I suppose the modern equivalent of this is a cellphone out somewhere with poor coverage, so that you

only have one bar and your phone call keeps breaking up. You need to move, to get yourself to a better place if you want a strong and clear signal.

When we are out of alignment with God and come to ourselves about the need to change, the theological word for this is repentance. That's an important word for Lent. Repentance is a coming to our senses; of knowing that when we are out of tune, misaligned and distorted, something has to change. Sometimes repentance is needed because we think too much of ourselves—prideful, vain, impatient, prejudiced. But sometimes repentance is needed because we think too little of ourselves; we don't believe things can get better; we believe we're stuck, that we're not worth the effort and will never get the prize. The prodigal was guilty of both, and if we're honest, so are most of us.

As I mentioned, when the prodigal son came to himself, that was an important moment—a time of repentance. But that's not the real point of this parable either. Not entirely. We need to back up and consider another person in the parable—the father of the two boys. His main part in the parable comes at the end when he welcomes home the prodigal and tries to convince the elder son to join the party. But from the moment the prodigal walked away from home, the father was still an active part of this drama. He had a household and an estate to run. He had another son and workers, all of whom relied on him, looking to him for stability. The father had to balance keeping an eye on the family business, while also keeping one eye on the road—hoping to see his other son return. All of this was true before the prodigal son came to himself. All of this was happening before the young man brushed off the dirt from the pigsty, brushed off and repented of his sins and folly, and set his face to return home.

The father's love preceded everything that happened in this parable. That's the only way this story adds up to good news for you and me. Hear again vs. 20-24: *So the prodigal 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 servants, '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.'*

I quoted Max Lucado in the bulletin sidebar: *Mercy gave the prodigal a second chance. Grace gave him a feast.* American evangelicals have always put a lot of weight upon repentance—tearfully throwing ourselves at the throne of grace seeking God's forgiveness. Yes, there is a place for repentance. There is a need to weigh ourselves, our actions and inactions in the scales of righteousness. That is important, but it is not the whole story. The prodigal came to himself when he stood up from the pigsty, repented and turned his face toward home. But he became himself—fully himself, a beloved son and child of God—when he lost himself once more in his father's embrace. Mercy lets us back on the property and gives us second chances. But grace—grace

runs to embrace us; puts robes on our shoulders and rings on our fingers and throws a celebration party.

The Presbyterian faith has long reminded us of a simple yet profound truth: *We are saved by grace through faith.* Sure, faith is important. Faith is coming to ourselves, standing up, and knowing the direction we need to face is toward God, toward Christ Jesus. But that act doesn't save us. Grace saves us—unmerited, freely-given, ever-available and, like the father's persistent gaze down an empty road, it patiently waits for us to accept its embrace. The preacher Frederick Buechner put it this way: *People are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do.*

The Parable of the Loving Father and Prodigal Son is appropriate for these days. We need to come to ourselves. We need to ask big questions: If we are not living in ways that preserve this world for our children and grandchildren, then why not? If the way we get information and communicate with one another only leads to division, to demonizing and mistrusting one other, then what needs to be done differently? If the ways we protect ourselves only involve weapons of destruction, then where have our priorities gone astray? At the same time, we also need to ask small, personal questions: In spite of darkness in my life, where have I known light? In spite of my weariness and uncertainty, where do I feel peace? When did I last smile? When did I last feel seen and valued? And how can I stay tomorrow just a bit longer in those places than I have today? Light, peace, laughter, being valued—they come from being held by God. Second chances are nice—mercy is nice—but we need grace; we need God's embrace.

Jesus doesn't mess around with half answers when he tells a story. He looked around at the powerful and powerless with the same gaze and told about sheep and coins and a feast to which all were invited. He said, "Look, the lost have been found; ones given up for dead are alive. Rejoice!" What could be more important than that?

Which brings me back to where I started, to Szyborska's poem. Out of a hundred people—out of us right here: some know better (about 52), some doubt every step (nearly all the rest). Many are glad to lend a hand if it doesn't take too long (as high as 49); a few are good because they can't be otherwise (four, maybe five). Sadly some of us can be savage in crowds or cruel when forced by circumstances. Some only take from life; many are hunched over in pain, no flashlight in the dark. But even Szyborska ends with a word of hope—how many are worthy of compassion? Ninety-nine. To which Jesus appends three more statistics: Ninety-nine are worthy of compassion you say? Let me tell you about a shepherd who searches for the one lost sheep, the woman who sweeps for the one lost coin, and the loving parent who welcomes home that last prodigal child. Such is the nature of God for you, for me, for us. Thanks be to God!