

The Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010
St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Boerne, Texas
David M. Evans, Interim Pastor

The Parables of the Lost: the Lost Younger Son

We are on a five week journey into the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke. There we find three parables found nowhere else in the gospels. I am calling them the parables of the lost, though they could just as well be called the parables of the found. Each of these parables has the common theme that something was lost and is found. Today we look at the parable of the lost younger son.

Listen for the Word of God as it is recorded in the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke:
Luke 15:1-3, 11-24

“He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.”

The reason Jesus tells these parables is because the religious leaders, the righteous ones who go to synagogue each week and believe the scriptures to be the very Word of God and live ethically according to the law and are good and patriotic citizens, they are complaining. They are complaining that Jesus hangs out with sinners. They are irritated that Jesus seems to care more about those who are lost than he dares about those who faithfully keep the lights on in the synagogue. So Jesus tells these parables to demonstrate his passion for those who are lost. A passion he hopes and prays the religious leaders might come to share some day.

First he tells the parable of the lost sheep, and we are astounded that a shepherd would leave 99 good and loyal and righteous sheep to go out and search for one disloyal and untrustworthy lost sheep, because obviously 99 sheep in the hand are worth much more than one sheep in the bush. Then Jesus tells a parable about a woman who loses a coin and turns the house upside down to find it, and in the process Jesus reminds us that though we think we want desperately to be in relationship with God, God is even more desperate to be in relationship with us. Because in one way or another all of us are lost. So first we have one hundred sheep. Then we have ten coins. Now two sons. Could it be that Jesus is bringing his passion for the lost closer and closer to home with every parable he tells?

We know this parable by heart. We know this story because it is as familiar to us as our own story. Because it is our own story in so many ways. The story begins with a shocking request: the younger son says to his father: *“Give me my share of the estate.”* This is shocking enough to us. But such a request would have amazed his original listeners. For in the middle eastern world, the culture in which this parable is set, when a father dies the oldest son traditionally receives a double portion of what the other children inherit. If a father has two sons, the eldest gets two thirds of the estate. The younger son receives one third. But this only transpires when the father dies.

In Jesus' parable the younger son asks for his inheritance now. It is a sign of the deepest disrespect for the father. In essence, the younger son is wishing his father dead. And the deeper message is: *"I want my father's things, but not my father."* Those listening to Jesus tell this story that day know exactly what happens next. The father beats his younger, disrespectful and selfish son senseless then kicks him out of the house. At least that is what should happen, because it is certainly what he deserves.

Yet what actually happens is shocking. Without comment the father does what the son asks. He gives his younger son his inheritance. And the rest of the story is pretty predictable. The younger son goes to Los Angeles (or New York City or New Orleans or San Antonio...you don't have to go far to find trouble) and blows his inheritance on fast cars and loose women and drinks on the house at seedy bars. When it is all gone he has to slop pigs for a living. Until one day he "came to himself" which I consider one of the most poignant sentences in scripture. He "came to himself". In other words, he realizes just what an idiot he had been and decides to go home and throw himself at the mercy of his father. He goes home and instead of the beating and humiliation he deserves his father throws a party and barbecues the fatted calf for his son who was dead is alive, his son who was lost is found. That is the parable in a nutshell.

This parable speaks powerfully to our generation. Many have commented that our recent economic crisis was caused by a generation that wants it all. Now. Christopen Lasch wrote a book a few years ago called **The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations**. The title of the book says worlds about our dilemma. He writes:

"To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself..."

Narcissism, the belief that I am at the center of the universe and the universe revolves around me and my wants and needs, is nothing new. Jesus' prodigal son is the poster boy for narcissism. He makes those of us who are responsible, who pay as we go, who are careful with our money, who do not believe in debt, and who are generous with those who are truly in need, well, he just makes us angry. But that is the rest of the story and we will have to wait until next week to get angry.

For this is a parable about God's amazing grace and passionate love for those who are lost. And God's passion for the lost to come home. And God's unwillingness to let anything stand in God's way of embracing them with love. If you are one of the lost, then the good news to you today is that every day is an opportunity to begin again. When I greet you each Sunday morning with the words of the Psalmist, when I say:

"This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it..."

I am doing so much more than simply greeting you. I am reminding you that each day is a gift from God and an invitation from the God of the second chance to begin again. For God is out there at this moment searching for you and preparing to welcome you home.

On one of my trips to Guatemala in the 90's someone told me a story. It may be true. Or it may be a parable which means that it is deeper than simply true. It is the story of a mother and daughter who lived a life of desperate poverty in a small village. The mother worked long and hard in a sometimes futile attempt to just survive. But she loved her daughter more than life itself.

The daughter, Maria, was sixteen years old. One day she decided that she could now make her own decisions about how to live her life. She began to test her mother at every turn. Then she began to threaten to leave the small village for the excitement and opportunities in Guatemala City. The mother begged and pleaded with her not to leave. She knew her daughter was naïve and had no conception of the kind of life she would face in a city where people took advantage of the poor and the naïve. The daughter was convinced her mother did not know what she was talking about.

One morning the mother awakened and went to check on Maria. The room was empty. The daughter and her few meager possessions were gone. The mother did not hesitate. She took what little money she had and went to a photo booth. She took as many pictures of herself as her money would allow. And with her remaining money she bought a bus ticket to Guatemala City.

Once in the city she went to all the places she thought her daughter might go. In the bus stations and in cheap hotels and in seedy restaurants and bars the mother would tape a photo of herself where it would be most likely to be seen. Finally, exhausted and despairing, she took the bus back to her village.

A few days later an equally exhausted and despairing sixteen year old girl came down the steps of a hotel after a night of allowing herself to be used and abused just to survive. After only one week her hopes had been smashed and her life was in ruins. As she descended the steps she happened to see a photo on a mirror in the lobby of the hotel. She looked, then she looked again, unable to believe her eyes. It was her mother! She went to the mirror, removed the photo, turned it over, and read the words:

"I love you. Please come home."

These are the words that flow from the lips of God all day, every day, to all of us who are lost in this world. *"I love you. Please come home."*

As we look forward to next week and the parable of the lost elder brother, I am reminded that Spanish-speaking Christians have a powerful proverb that goes:

"No hay santos sin un pasado. No hay pecadores sin un futuro."

For those of you who speak Spanish but have never encountered Spanish spoken in East Texan, the translation is this:

"There are no saints without a past. There are no sinners without a future." AMEN