

Lost and Found- July 19th, 2015- St. Andrew's, Whitby

Scripture Text: Luke 15: 1-32

Much of Jesus' teaching in his short time on the earth was presented to the people in parables- short pithy stories. Usually we pluck the individual parable of the Prodigal Son out of its context. But in doing so we lose some of the richness of its meaning... A better title is perhaps "the Parable of the Lost Ones"... plural... What is surprising is that this parable was meant for a specific audience- a parable addressed to the Pharisees- the New Testament equivalent of our modern day church leaders and teachers. Well, being here for four Sundays in a row gives us a unique opportunity to dig down into this multi-faceted parable a bit more deeply... a teaching in four parts. Is there anything new that the Spirit of God wants to teach us today? I believe the answer is always "Yes"- the Spirit is always speaking in new ways... God does not necessarily have the same message for each person, but he has a specific message for each of us today. It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will give each of us new insight to this concept of being lost and then found.

So what does it mean to "be lost"? I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Charles Price for insight into being lost. What does being lost mean to you? Have you ever lost a child in a store? Have you ever lost your glasses? Your keys? Can you recreate the sense of anxiety and fear that comes over you when you lose someone or something? Why are you so anxious and fearful? Isn't it because that lost person or item is extremely valuable to you? My parents experienced this anxiety and fear one Sunday morning when we were very young. My Dad went to choir rehearsal early with two of us in tow, and my Mum followed later with the other two kids. You

can see where this is going can't you? After Church our parents both went home in separate cars. But when they got home they realized that the head count was wrong! Dad thought that Mum had my sister, and Mum thought that Dad had my sister, when in fact they had both left her at church! This story gets better in the telling over the years, and was certainly a story that my parents could never live down..." My sister certainly got a lot of mileage out of it..."Do you remember the time when you left me at church?"

When we express our sympathy to someone in mourning, we might say...I am sorry for your loss... this is your acknowledgement that the deceased person was very valued. On the contrary, if you were to lose a penny from your pocket now, would you stop and look for it or pick it up? Would you be fearful and anxious about the missing penny? No? Why not? Because it is worthless – a penny is actually worth less than it cost to make it.

So let's begin at the very beginning...a very good place to start...let's look at the setting of these three stories of lost and found...

Through a large portion of Luke's gospel, Jesus is on a journey. Beginning in Luke 9: 51 we learn that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem...what does this mean?...this means he recognized that His earthly ministry was coming to an end... he was facing Golgotha and the cross and the coming political storm...Jesus was facing His crucifixion. Even so as he travels towards Jerusalem, he continues to preach and teach his last messages at places along the way.

Next let's look at the characters in the story. At the beginning of Luke 15 we read:

“Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ²This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!”

So we have “sinners, Pharisees and Jesus” playing a role in this story.

So who were the “sinners”? When Christians hear the word sinner, we very quickly lump ourselves into that category don’t we... “For all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.” (Romans 3:23)

But in New Testament times, there were two distinct categories of people...the “in people” and the “out people.” The “in people” were the religious people who were trying to obey every jot and tittle of the Law of Moses. They knew the law of God backwards and forwards... to God’s 613 specific commandments; they had added detailed interpretations of each commandment. These people were called the Pharisees, which meant “the separated ones.” Pharisees were the teachers of the law...each of them had a day job, and they taught in the synagogues on the Sabbath. Some of the more commonly known Pharisees are Joseph of Aramithea who buried Jesus in his own tomb and Saul of Tarsus, who later became known as Paul... the Pharisees took their religious faith very, very seriously.

The “out people” were ANY of the people who were not able to keep the Law of Moses as described by the Pharisees. Why were some people not able to keep the Law of Moses? Those

of you who have ever read even a few chapters in Leviticus will understand exactly how detailed the law really was.

- Some people could not keep the Jewish purity laws because of their illnesses. Lepers for example, were always considered to be ceremonially unclean.
- Others could not afford to pay their taxes so as a result they were treated like common criminals and thrown into prison,
- Others could not keep commandments such as to keep the Sabbath day holy because they had to work 7 days a week in order to feed their families.
- Some women with no other family support fell into prostitution in order to survive.

So the “out people” were lumped together as “sinners” ...they were the marginalized people of that society...ironically they were marginalized precisely because of the religious leaders’ slavish insistence on obedience to the 613 laws as they interpreted them. And they were attracted to Jesus because he was not anything like the Pharisees... he cared about them and welcomed him into their company.

If there were such a thing as a hierarchy of sin, the tax collectors were singled out by both the Jewish People and the Pharisees and thought of as “notorious sinners”...
the worst kind of sinners.

So we say, what was so bad about the tax collectors? Doesn't everybody have to pay taxes?

Wasn't Zaccheus, the wee, wee man who climbed up in the sycamore tree, as the Sunday school song goes...wasn't he a good man?

Well, the Jews were living under the rule of Rome. Rome hired people, often Gentiles, to collect taxes on behalf of the government. It wouldn't be so bad if they just collected the taxes that were owing to Rome, but they were also allowed to run a little side business. As long as Rome got its due, they were allowed to extort more money from the people and keep it for themselves. In the Zaccheus story, when Zaccheus repented, he offered to pay back 4 times the money that he had collected in his little side business.

At the beginning of Luke 15, we learn that these notorious sinners heard that Jesus was going up to Jerusalem and were all drawing near to hear this travelling preacher teach. They were attracted to Jesus! And Jesus welcomed them! The Pharisees began to "murmur" or complain that Jesus was eating and receiving tax collectors and sinners into fellowship with them.

In that culture especially to eat with someone, meant to accept the person on a very deep and intimate level. So Jesus' actions in teaching and eating with these "outcasts" went totally against the Pharisees concept of "separateness." How could Jesus be a righteous rabbi when he kept company with such outcasts?

So Jesus addressed these unhappy, murmuring, grumbling Pharisees **specifically** in this parable in three parts.

Reading this passage through our modern lens is what makes it difficult to understand what Jesus was actually trying to do. What we often miss is that Jesus, in modern jargon, actually “set the Pharisees up” in his parable. When we look at the three parts of the parable as a unit, we can see this very clearly.

First, Jesus asks the Pharisees hypothetically:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it”.

Jesus was saying... if any Pharisee owned a hundred sheep and lost one of them, he would know the monetary value of the one missing sheep and immediately go looking for it. He would count each sheep at night as it went into the sheep fold 97...98...99, and if he saw that one sheep was missing, he would leave the 99 in the care of another shepherd and go out on the hillside to look for the lost sheep. When the missing sheep was found, the shepherd placed the sheep on his shoulders and carried it back to the flock. And there was great rejoicing! You see, the sheep in this large flock likely all belonged to a whole extended family. So while the sheep was valuable to the shepherd...the sheep was also part of the wealth of the whole family of the shepherd and valuable to the community as well. And the Pharisees nodded with Jesus in agreement...so far...so good.

So then Jesus went on...

In the second part of the parable, a widow had lost a valuable silver coin. This coin was part of her wedding headpiece that consisted of 10 coins. The widow realized that one of the coins was missing; she literally upended her house frantically looking for it. She could not rest until she found it. Yes, it had sentimental value but more importantly for the widow, it also had monetary value...the equivalent of a full day's salary in fact. When she found her coin, there was great rejoicing and a celebration because the lost coin had been found.

And again the Pharisees nodded in agreement with Jesus...

In the stories about the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus brought the Pharisees to an agreement that lost things were valuable.

So Jesus leads the Pharisees to the crux of his teaching. I believe that Jesus deliberately told these three stories out of his love and concern for the Pharisees. He saw their devotion to righteousness, their eagerness to do the right thing, to honour God and to obey God's law. But he also recognized that their zeal for righteousness blinded them to the whole truth of the gospel...that well above any THINGS, it was PEOPLE that were even more valuable to God. It was God's desire that all people would be saved through the coming Messiah. Just like the lost sheep was saved and the lost coin was saved, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, were responsible to point the people under their care to salvation...and they weren't doing that...because they didn't understand that this very same Jesus was the Messiah they were

looking for. The name for Jesus in Hebrew is “Yeshua” which means “salvation.” Ironically, the Pharisees in their attempt to follow the law to the letter, were very quick to judge others and write others off- the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the destitute, the immoral, the unclean, and those people that associated with them... Jesus admonished the Pharisees to not lay burdens on the people that they were unable to bear. They could follow every iota of the law and still miss Jesus’ greatest teaching, which was LOVE.

So for us as Christians today, this Biblical teaching points us to the fact that God wants above all to be in a loving relationship with people...all people...the lost ones are just as valuable and important to God as the ones who are in the Body of the Church. Like the Pharisees, it is also possible for people in the Church to be lost, even though they think they are found!

Today, are you feeling a burden of sin that you can hardly carry? Jesus is calling you to come home to him.

Are you feeling lost and alone? Jesus is calling you to come home to him.

Do you wonder in your heart if God really loves you? Jesus is calling you to come home to him.

Next Sunday, we will look more closely at the lost younger son in the parable of the Prodigal son. As a teacher, I can’t leave you without some homework! I invite you to reread this passage in the light of what you have learned today. In the story of the Prodigal Son, whom do you identify with? Are you feeling like the “younger son” or perhaps are you like the older brother or maybe the waiting father? What is the Holy Spirit trying to teach you, to teach me?

May God open up the scriptures to us in a fresh and revealing way over the next four weeks as we explore Jesus' teaching to us about God's immeasurable love. AMEN