

Home: Lost and Far Away
4th Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Jeremiah 29:4-7](#) (NLT)
Luke 15_(Selected) (Barclay)

We have heard, this morning, three Gospel stories of something lost, something far away. Silver coins, silly sheep – and stubborn sons. All of these have a home, a place they're meant to be – and yet, they find themselves lost and far away. Coins are meant to be in a purse, but one has gone walkabout, finding itself, I'm sure, in the land of misplaced socks and report cards with grades less than a B. Yet, the woman who owns the coin acts prodigiously¹, profligately, positively lavishly, lighting lamps and spending hours searching high and low for the one coin that's lost. Then, finding it, she celebrates to excess, maybe even spending more for the food and drink for the party than the value of the lost coin. What was lost – has come home. And that's more valuable than anything.

A shepherd has a hundred sheep. Wait – there's one less, that's 99. Clearly the best thing to do is to let the 99 found ones continue to graze as they will, and tramp all over creation seeking out the one that is lost. The one that is far away. Then, after who knows how long, the shepherd carries the sheep back. In terms of time spent, the shepherd is acting prodigiously. Profligately. Positively lavishly, losing time while looking for the little lost lamb. Seeking a sheep simply standing against a subtle darkness. Then, finding it, he celebrates to excess, calling all of his friends and family together for a party – where they, presumably, are not serving lamb chops.

Both the shepherd and woman of coins behave irrationally in seeking the lost. Yet, it is that irrational behavior that allows them to *find* the thing that is lost. They are not dispassionately seeking a balance of profit and loss – not tallying up

¹ Prodigious – related to prodigal, it means wasteful or over-the-top

SHRINK and writing it off as bad business. Instead, they scour the land for the thing that is far from home – and in so doing, they are the homecoming celebration on the move, bringing the home to the thing that is lost, celebrating with friends and neighbors and family.

Finally, we come to the last of the lost stories. And this time, it is people that are lost, and not things. First, following the stories just before it, we have a son who leaves home. Who travels to far away lands, spending prodigiously an inheritance he has not earned – indeed, he has even asked for it before his father has died. While his father is still living and working. Shock! Horror! The topsy-turvy-ness of it all.

Meanwhile, the son at home puts in the hours. Though this is a millennium and a half early, this son is the Paragon of the Protestant Work Ethic. Slaving away at a minimum wage job, like a field hand rather than the heir apparent to the CEO of Growing Things, incorporated. Here's the son who gets his hands dirty! Here's the son that has befriended the underlings, who knows the scoop on what's happening as soon as he deigns to check with his contacts. Look at him – so proud of his work with artisanal bread making. True, the recipe is his mother's. Also true, she's still the one baking it, because he is too proud to stoop to do work inside the house. But, still – his bread will disrupt the market, once he puts in another 75 hours of dynamic – no, synergistic! – work this week. Maybe even 90 hours – there's time to sleep once Daddy CEO steps down.

Now, back in the far country, the younger son is not having as exciting an adventure as he thought. Oh, sure, the first few months were awesome – silver and gemstones flowed from his wallet like water through a sieve. Now, though, he's having to wake up even before the sun rises to bring profane pigs their perfectly nasty slop and pods. More than that, he's now so hungry that even those pods, the ones he's feeding to the swollen swine – even those pods look tasty. There's a great irony here, in that the gemstones he carried are measured by weight in carats – a measurement based on the weight of the carob pod. He's now hungrily looking at carats of carobs instead of carats of gems. He has not walked with Wisdom, and has

been fooled by Folly. Yet, a glimmer of hope remains – though he’s starving there in the far country, maybe at home, he could eat a crust of bread from time to time, even working for his dad – or his brother, if it comes to that. So, he sets off for home, practicing his speech of repentance all the way.

Let’s pause the story for a moment of context. In Jesus’ day, the listeners would have known that, generally, they were supposed to identify with the younger son. Cain and Abel – Jacob and Esau – Joseph and his brothers – even David, youngest son of Jesse. And this parable of Jesus’ also strikes echoes of the time of exile, when most (but not all!) Jews were forced from their homes and had to live in Gentile lands. Or, the flight from Egypt, leaving their homes behind for a new place of their own. During the exile, the prophet Jeremiah reminded the people of Israel that they were to seek to establish themselves wherever they were dispersed – to seek the Shalom, the peace and welfare, of their family and even their foreign city.

So, turning back to the parable itself: does the younger son live up to this? First, the younger son chose to leave home, not exiled. Next, he didn’t seek the welfare of his family or the city – instead, he sought his own desires. This is not a model for good living. But what does the younger son model? A small spark of hope – no matter how many poor choices he’s made, or the depths to which he’s fallen, he’s got some hope that his Father will be merciful. Even that barest hope is enough to send him home.

And his hope, barely glimmering enough to see in a dark room, is met with a prodigious, profligate, and positively lavish outpouring of love and grace. His father, Mr. CEO of Growing Things, incorporated, spots him in the distance. Not stopping for a moment, he rushes headlong towards his son, heedless of propriety or anything other than joy, scooping up his beloved son into his arms, and weeping with tears of joyous reunion. The son starts to stutter out his prepared speech, but the father interrupts with words of forgiveness and restoration – home has once again sought out the lost and far away. And, again, there’s a party, far out of balance with what you’d expect. When home finds the lost, there’s a party. It has to happen.

Except... no one told the older brother. Maybe he’s heard the preparations,

though – heard the loud noises and the people dropping their implements of labor, and you know the older son would roll his eyes heavenward, and let out a loud sigh of impatience. “Ugh. Now, I’ve got to do EVEN MORE WORK to make up for these slackers. Hey, buddy, where are y’ off to? What’s happening out there?”

“Dude. Your brother’s come home, and everyone’s been preparing of the major party your Dad has planned. Shouldn’t you be getting ready, too?”

“I have been WORKING unlike that lazybones of a child of my father. Ugh. He gets home, and we throw a party? Does no one work anymore?”

Here, then, is the last scene – a confrontation between the prodigious love of the father and the grumbling older son. Again, it’s hard not to have some sympathy for the older son – I’ve been playing him rather broadly, but he has been at home, doing his filial duty. And that’s exactly the problem – when he questions his dad, he finds out that, anytime he wanted to, he could have stopped working and had a party. He’s been working so hard that he, too, has been lost and far from home. Instead of following God’s example, and making sure to take time to rest every week, he’s been grinding, day in and day out.

Now, his dad tells him, you have to rest. We have to rejoice – because your brother has come back from the dead. Home has come to the lost and far away – offering food for the hungry traveler, and rest for the weary worker. Hope for reconciliation, for *shalom* in the home – *shalom* and more, joy and celebration. Yes, this is the story of the prodigious, profligate, positively lavish love and grace – overflowing onto the wastrel and the whiner, the contrite and the constant, the fool who flees and the one who overworks. And that’s true for tax collector or pharisee, foreigner or native, for anyone and everyone.

May the prodigious grace of God guide your path. May the profligate love of Jesus lead you to seek the lost and take home to them. May the positively lavish joy of the Holy Spirit help you to celebrate the return of those far away and lost at home. Amen.