

Sermon 031917 Lost

Scripture Luke 15: 11-32

Sermon Title- Lost At Home

Any excuse for a party. You know that Meg's son, Charlie, is a Biomedical Engineer with concentration in stem cells. In order to get his master's degree, he did an internship where he did research on rats. His experiment was successful and he called his mother during his celebration at his favorite brew pub in San Diego. Meg said, "Charlie, it's Tuesday and you're at the pub? Charlie said, "Mom, we need to celebrate the little days, too!"

Any excuse for a party. The woman had been on a diet for two years. The scale said she had lost five pounds. She called her family and friends and told them it's time to celebrate. She invited them over. She made a chocolate fudge layer cake and bought a gallon of vanilla ice cream for the party.

Any excuse for a party. A high school friend of mine, after ten years of marriage, decided to jettison her husband. The court hearing was on a Friday. She invited a group of her friends and family over to the house for a party that night to celebrate the divorce with her. I turned down the invitation. Being divorced myself, I failed to see the cause for celebration. Sometimes parties are inappropriate.

Any excuse for a party. Today's parable may be the most famous Parable of Jesus. We know the story as 'The Parable of the Prodigal

Son.’ If you don’t know the parable, a man had two sons. The younger son asked his father for his inheritance up front and his request was granted. The young man traveled to a distant country where he squandered the money on ‘wine, women, and song.’ When he was broke, he got a job feeding a farmer’s pigs and he was so hungry he ended up eating with the pigs. He decided that he could do better by swallowing his pride and go home to work as a hired hand for his father, where he would be treated better. As he approached home, his father saw him off in the distance, ran to his returning son, embraced him, and kissed him. The father ordered the best robe to be brought out and worn by the wayward son.

The father ordered a fatted calf to be slaughtered for a celebration. He called out, “This son of mine was lost and he’s found!”

Now, the older son, the one who stayed and worked with his father on the farm came in from the field and heard the celebration going on complete with dancing. He asked what was happening and was told. He became angry. He confronted the father, saying that it was not fair that he had worked like a slave and he was always obedient. Never had he been celebrated even with a young goat to enjoy with his friends. The father said weakly that he, the older son was always with him, and what his was the older son’s and please celebrate the return of your brother. That’s it. There’s no real ending to the parable. Maybe Jesus is forcing us to write our own ending.

There are three characters in this parable, the prodigal son, the father, and the older son. People often find themselves relating to one of the three characters. When I read this story, I relate to the prodigal son. Who do you relate to? I relate to the prodigal son in that I left home to go to college and left the church at the same time. I traveled to distant lands like China and India and also described myself as a spiritual wanderer. Although I never ate with pigs, I spent time broke, in more ways than financial. My decades away from church have made my time since returning to a life of faith richer and more vibrant maybe than if I'd never left.

Now, I've preached before on this parable and my message has been that this parable is more about the forgiveness of the father than it is about the sins of the son. The father in the parable represents God. A nice sermon message is that no matter how you have sinned, forgiveness is available from God if you are willing and able to repent. If you are sorry for your sins, you are forgiven and welcomed with open arms into the Kingdom of God. If you relate to the father in the story, then granting undeserved forgiveness can make the world a better place. That's a good, solid sermon message and have a nice day.

But Jesus, as usual, gives us something unexpected to ponder. He complicates the story. He introduces the older, loyal, obedient son who is furious that his foolish brother is being celebrated. The forgiveness of the father, which is a good thing, has led to unintended consequences-

serious disruption in the home. What's the old saw? No good deed goes unpunished.

We've talked about any excuse for a party. The older brother does not argue with the wayward brother being welcomed home. He argues with the party and he has a good point. What lesson is to be learned here by the prodigal son? Squandering money and a life of dissipation is to be celebrated? This party was not a stayed reception with cucumber slices on a triangle or an olive on a Ritz Cracker. This is a feast with the very best food available and dancing no less. For what? An embrace and a prayer of thanksgiving would have been appropriate, but the father threw the bash making his other son furious.

Let's spend time with the elder son and see where he brings us. In a real sense, the older son is as lost as his brother. He is lost at home. It is easy to get lost at home. When you are home it is easy to take for granted how good home is. The people who take home for granted are the ones who are there all the time. Sometimes distance provides the perspective from which the real value of things can be seen. Home doesn't seem like much when you are leaving on vacation, but it looks a heck of a lot better when you return from vacation. Where had the older brother been to know how good home was?

It's like that at church, too. A problem for many church people is that they've always been there. They can't see the forest for the trees. They start focusing on little things and finding fault. I'm not saying that

this is a problem at Union Church, because it isn't. Any negativity usually comes from long standing members. The people that appreciate the church the most are newcomers and people who moved away.

In the parable, the eldest son was earning his keep and complained to the father that he deserved better treatment if not a party. It's easy to get lost at home because it's easy to think that you deserve to be there. We have deep needs to justify ourselves, show how important we are, and hold ourselves up as more important than the next guy. We keep score. We cry 'justice' or 'that's not fair!' when someone gets something they don't deserve. Have you heard church people tell you how much they do for the church and how important they are? Have you done that? In God's kingdom, there is no seniority. Everyone comes in a sinner and his here by grace.

The elder son assumed that because he worked with his father on a daily basis, they were close. It is easy to get lost at home because it is easy to confuse physical proximity to spiritual proximity. I was in a bad marriage and that house was the loneliest place on earth. We can be physically touching and be out of touch. The son who stayed and the father might have lived together, worked together and not only have not appreciated each other but also not really known each other.

People who have a strong church background, or who are very active in the life of the church, may assume that they therefore have a significant relationship with God. That may or may not be the case. It is

an old and important truth that you can be in weekly attendance in church, and even be in the pulpit and be out of touch with God. The life of faith can be a journey of moving back and forth between being outside and inside a relationship with God.

The younger, prodigal son has many advantages over his brother: 1) he knows how good home is 2) he knows he does not deserve to be there 3) he knows what a distance he has put between him and his father. He has hit bottom. His situation is clear and unambiguous. His father offers forgiveness beyond his wildest fantasies. It would be easy if the forgiveness of the father were to make a nice, 'lived happily ever after story.'

But there is no peace because of the older, deserving son. The unintended consequences of the father's extravagant forgiveness have blown up the household. The father wants the maturity from the older son that will bring him to embrace his wayward brother like his father did. That is not the case. He learns that in getting one son back he might lose another.

The revival or renewal of a church does not necessarily happen when the world comes to our door, when new people join. We are now into our Church Vitality Program. Open and Affirming is the first step. With the vote being 91% approval, the church was clearly ready for that. There will be more changes that the church will see. We pray that our long-standing members keep open minds and warm hearts when these

things come down the pike. Our outstanding Moderator, Jamie Micheson, has said that his goal in the vitality program is to make sure his kids have a healthy, vibrant church when they grow up. We know we have a great church. History has shown that churches that close their doors do so in part because they stayed stagnant.

This is what the gospel can do for all of us- those far away and those very near. It calls us to taste how good it is to be home and to be church. It is to realize that our place at the table is only by the grace of God. It is to hold that our God receives prodigals from far away- and from one inch. It is to be awakened by God's unyielding love and to share it with those close and those far away. When that happens, well now that's an excuse for a party! AMEN