

Lent 4 C
St. Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32
March 6, 2016
St. George's Bolton
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Lost and Found

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable:"

It would be easy to see the Prodigal Son as the miscreant here. He demands his inheritance and runs away from home to squander it on indulging his pleasure and wonton desires. It is tempting to look down on him and cast aspersions about his conduct and his unworthiness to return to his father. Most would find it difficult to identify with the prodigal son.

But what about the older brother who is always so good, always doing the right things, trying to please, he supposes, his father? And isn't he also trying to please others who live in his community? The older brother is trying to measure up in the eyes of others because he doesn't feel good about himself.

This week this theme has been played out on the stage of national politics. There is the prodigal son candidate who appears to be squandering the political capitol of his party with "unpresidential" ways and behavior. He is accused of not playing by the rules of the political establishment in Washington. Then there is the so-called political establishment lashing out at him, fearful of losing their grip on their political party, and crying out, "we have always played by the rules, and he has not, and yet he is getting all the votes!" He is not the messiah

people would like to follow, no politician is. But he is tapping into the feelings of those who feel disenfranchised and lost. And connecting with the lost is what the Prodigal is all about.

This year, even on the other political side, frustration is great with voters feeling the establishment is trying to co-opt their votes with so-called "*super delegates*." This sets up a tension in American politics not unlike that which Jesus faced in the first century. As the establishment struggles on both political sides to maintain their control of the status quo and their power by criticizing the rule breaking going on during this campaign, these folks sound a bit like the Pharisees to me, who complained when Jesus broke the rules eating with tax collectors and sinners, and associating himself with women of ill repute. I think there is a lesson to be learned here.

Now, mind you, I am not taking political sides here, but rather, I would like to apply this apparent dichotomy to the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son. It would seem that this story is referring to two types of folks in the world, both in need of the love of their God. The first group is represented by the Prodigal Son, those notorious and sometimes sinful-livers and status quo breakers, who choose to pursue their own desires and pleasures in this life, apparently living apart from God, and whom you might say are lost, and betwixt those who live by the rules and try to do the right thing all the time, seeing themselves as morally superior to the first group. These sound an awful lot like many of the people whom Jesus encountered with the Pharisees and the Sadducees of his day, also including the Roman and Israelite politicians, along with the rest of the religious establishment in Jerusalem.

In our example from what is happening in politics in America, there is a third group of people: and *those would be **the voters***, who have nothing to do with either the establishment or any candidates, but rather, like lost sheep are being lead by these folks. Their votes are desired, but

not so much their voices and what really concerns them. It is a sign of the deepening divide between the well to-do establishment who try to buy elections and chasm they have created separating them from the rest of us.

You, my friends, are the voters, both literally and metaphorically.

So there are three groups in today's parable: 1.) There are the so-called unreligious who live as though there were no God and that the purpose of life is for the satisfaction of their pleasure: "*the Prodigal Children*" or those accused of being "*lost*;" 2.) There are the moralists who attempt to live by their assumptions about the rules of life and impose those on others, seeking to control them, at the very least to feel superior to them; 3.) And then there are those of us who are the hearers of the story, like the disenfranchised voters in my example above. We are those looking to follow God with open ears, minds and hearts, though not without *the need to be loved and found when we are lost*.

So many are looking for someone to lead them. We look to teachers. We look to politicians. We look to clergy. We look to business people. We look to Hollywood and sports celebrities to set examples for us for how we should lead our lives and to what we should aspire. We look for someone who will tell us what is the right way to live and how we can solve the problems in our lives which cause us anxiety. We don't like feeling lost. Who wants to be lost and hopeless?

The people in Jesus' day were disenfranchised from their leaders. They were forgotten and wandering in a vast desert, looking for guidance to find their way through. They were wandering in the wilderness again. They were completely disconnected from their leaders, both political and religious. These multitudes who came to hear Jesus speak were ***conveniently forgotten*** people, little people upon whom the powerful looked down. They were shepherds, farmers,

fishermen, mothers and home-makers, carpenters, stoneworkers and taxpayers who delivered the labor upon which the wealth and security of the ruling class was built. Sound familiar?

These unacceptable little people came to hear Jesus, the text says. People who most would look down upon: tax collectors and notorious sinners. Tax collectors were deemed evil not only because they were traitors to their own people by collecting the Roman Tax, but they often added surcharges for more than the Roman Government was actually asking, thereby having a lucrative trade to line their own pockets. They were traitors and thieves to their own kind. And who doesn't love to cast aspersions upon an obvious and notorious sinner? Remember Matthew the Evangelist and Apostle is one of them: a notorious tax collector himself.

Most of all the point of the Gospel passage is that these multitudes of common folk are **LOST**. And maybe not just the common folk, but also the Prodigals and the morally self-righteous are even more lost. Jesus offers three parables to underscore this in chapter 15 of St. Luke, the first of these being the Parable of the Lost Sheep:

"Then Jesus told them this parable: 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

Or the second, the Parable of the lost coin:

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I

tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Then comes the last Parable he told in this context, the Prodigal Son, which you heard in this morning's Gospel selection from chapter 15. All three of these center on the idea of the lost being found, and how great the rejoicing and relief is when the lost are found.

It is terrifying to feel truly lost. Children have horrible feelings and memories of abandonment when they get lost in a store. Adults get lost in the woods or in large cities and as night draws near, they sometimes panic, wishing for a map or a GPS to find their way out of the confusing mess. And we as adults are sometimes lost and do not know it, which I think is pretty scary.

Everyone can guess that the prodigal child is lost, and suspect that the unreligious are also lost to God and to themselves. It does not mean that they are not searching to be found or to find something. The lost seek others to join them in the spirit of—misery loves company—'*join me in my revelry in the mud so that I will know I am not alone in the rut or the pit of life!*' Not a few are tempted to follow those into this oblivion and abyss. The moralistic establishment seeks to control others and force them to live by their own rules, even if not hypocritical, they pave a road *away from God* to a place where others will be as lost as they are. And they don't get it either. The secret is that the unreligious, the prodigal children, and the religious establishment that is filled with self-righteousness are *just as lost* as those they seek to entice, lead or exercise power over. They are ultimately what Jesus calls, *blind guides: the blind leading the blind*. So we are all lost and need to be found and in the process, find one another and show others the way!

You are the map keepers. You are the GPS units for God on this earth. You are to show the way to others. You are to light up the path. Those

who are lost, long to be found. Do not hide your light but let it shine brightly to guide others to the way home to God.

The sort of faith and trust which the blind demonstrate when they place their trust in a guide dog to lead them around safely, is the sort of faith and trust we should be placing in God. Such is the trust and faithfulness which God desires of us as he leads us into new life. If you were lost, but now are found, blind, but now you see, like the old hymn suggests, then get out your maps and GPS units and find other lost folks and lead them back home to God. AMEN.