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Luke 15:11-32

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“So Who was Lost?”

We all can get lost in so many ways. Lost in trying to understand who we are and what we are supposed to be and do in this life, trying to find our purpose. Lost in trying to find a next step in our lives. It could be a change in our career, feeling stuck at a place where we are now. Lost in a relationship, not sure where it is going...it could be that we find ourselves lost when it comes to God...This chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel speaks to this reality of being lost, cut off, separated from the flow of love and grace and how God welcomes and embraces those who are lost. In this chapter there are three parables that Jesus tells the crowd that was following him and the Scribes and the Pharisees that were also standing there and listening to him. The last parable that we just heard, is traditionally called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” It is well known and one of the beloved parables of Jesus. It was very popular in the Middle Ages and in the times of Renaissance. Multiple artists used the parable as a theme for their works. The most famous one is perhaps the one by Rembrandt called “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” This parable sort of migrated from the Christian culture into the general culture. What it is usually famous for is the prodigal son. He is the lost one in the parable, well at least visibly. He was the one that separated himself from his family and his father and left with his early accessed inheritance. He was in a foreign country and did things his father or his family would never approve of. It is good that they did not have social media, especially Instagram stories back then. Maybe if they did, his homecoming would be drastically different. When he squandered everything he had found himself among the pigs and at that moment he came to himself and decided to return. We all know the father's reaction - running toward his son, embracing him and throwing a party for him! Repentance and joy!

This is how I remembered this parable and many sermons I heard on it, until I had my first preaching class in seminary, and the professor was assigning passages to the students in my class and he assigned this passage of Luke 15:11-32 to two people: one person to preach on the younger son and the other one to preach on the older son. I was too embarrassed to say “Excuse me. What? The older son? Why do we need to preach on him?” I had no idea that the older son has been lost too.

The older son was returning from a hard day of work on the field when he heard the music and noises happening at the house, and asked one of the servants

what was going on. “Your brother has come. Your father has killed the fatted calf because he got him back safe and sound.” You would think that the older brother would run into the house and give his his little brother a huge hug or whatever the brothers do. You would think that he missed his younger brother, that he was sick worried about him while he was gone. And now that he is home, he would be ecstatic to see him! But this it not the reaction that the older brother has. It says in the text, “and the older brother became angry and refused to go in.”

I have an older brother. And when I was 8 or 9 years old one morning I decided that I was not going to school that day. Now you need to know that I am not the rebellious one in the family, but that particular morning I just had enough of school and simply decided that I was not going. My mom tried to wake me up and I said I am not going to school today.” She left me alone for a little bit probably thinking I just needed a little bit more of sleep. But when she came back, I said, no I am not going. She started to beg me, and persuade me that I need to go to school, that is what kids do. I just said “No, I am not going to school today. I want a day off.” My brother who was probably in 9th grade was standing there, because we shared a room, and was really wanting me to go to school and was pushing hard on mom that she needed to win here and I needed to go to school. My brother even tried to slide me down the bed, I yelled and screamed, “NO! I want a day off today. I am not going to school” My mom was giving up. My brother was looking at my mom and said, “Are you really letting her get away with it? What about me? I also do not want to go anywhere today.” But I was so stubborn and would cry and go hysterics that my mom ended up letting me stay home. My brother left to school very angry at me and my mom, and he still reminds me of this.

Now I know this story does not exactly illustrate the circumstances between the younger and the older son in the parable, but it illustrates some of the dynamics that can happen between the younger and the older siblings. Jeffery Klugger, a senior writer at Time magazine and a writer of many books, including the one of the sibling relationships in his Ted talk on the same topic said,
“There maybe no relationship...that’s closer, finer, harder, sweeter, happier, sadder, more filled with joy or fraught with woe, than the relationship we have with our brothers and sisters.”

Who here has or had an older sibling? And who is the older sibling? The older ones, you are guys, are the ones that often times, are more mature, more responsible, more obedient. Or you may seem so to the world. Younger siblings seem to have more freedom and can do things that are out there and can even run away from home. And so the older brother in this parable seems to be mature, hard-working, obedient, and more responsible. And one can think that this fellow got his things together. But the way he refuses to go into the house and see his

younger brother, and even how he talks with his father shows how cut off and separated and lost he is from the love of his father and his family.

Just take a look at how he talks with his father. When the father finds out that the older brother refuses to go in, the father comes out and begs him to come in. And what the older brother says to him, "Listen!" He does not call him dad, or sometimes when we are mad at our father we can say "Father!" He does not even do that. He cuts himself off his relationship with his dad. Then he complains how hardworking he is, and he has done so much for the father. And he never had a party thrown for him. Then he says, "this son of yours." So he crossed that relationship off, too. And we hear resentment and even jealousy in his voice. "He has become a foreigner in his own house,"

How Henri Nouwen, a theologian and a writer, wrote in his book titled *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. It is an incredible book and I recommend all of you to read it because it goes in depth and talks about each character in the story. I know Kim La Rue has it and we might even have it in our library. For the base of his book he used the famous Rembrandt's painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son." He even went to Hermitage in St Petersburg to stare at the painting for hours. And he writes about his own experience as an older brother. He said,

"It is hard for me to concede that this bitter, resentful, angry man might be closer to me in a spiritual way than the lustful younger brother. Yet the more I think about the elder son, the more I recognize myself in him...I often wonder if it is not especially the elder sons who want to live up to the expectations of their parents and be considered obedient and dutiful. They often want to please. They often fear being a disappointment to their parents. But they often also experience, quite early in life, a certain envy toward their younger brothers and sisters, who seem to be less concerned about pleasing and much freer in "doing their own thing." Then he goes on to say, "The obedient and dutiful life of which I am proud or for which I am praised, feels, sometimes, like a burden that was laid on my shoulders and continues to oppress me, even when I have accepted it to such a degree that I cannot throw it off. I have no difficulty identifying with the elder son of the parable who complained: "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends." In this complaint, obedience and duty have become a burden, and a service has become a slavery."

So this lostness of the older son is deeply rooted in the reality of merit. He became a slave that earns his love by working hard for his father. He earns his grace

by doing everything just right, obeying every step of the way. But deep inside, he feels resentment and anger. This is his reality. His reality is not rooted in grace and unconditional love that is modeled and offered so well by the figure of the Father. The Father is the one that always runs towards his sons. He is the one that comes out of the house to get his older son and begs him to come in and celebrate. He is the one that reminds him that everything that he has belongs to the older son. In other words, the father said, "You are my son and I love you."

We might think that the parable says that the older brother is an evil one because he refuses to come in. I don't think so. He is just lost. Both siblings are lost. But it is the redemptive and restorative love of the father that runs towards them and embraces them. Both brothers are loved and accepted by God and in their lostness they are held. And this is how the love of God is holding us, maybe lost and maybe angry, and perhaps resenting. Maybe we are in the place of the younger brother, running away from God and making every mistake we can on this earth but then returning with a heart of repentance and a plea to be forgiven and taken in. And maybe we are just like the older brother, doing everything just right, attending worship and taking communion, and give faithfully, and try helping others, but it all feels like a burden to us. Friends, we are God's children and we are loved and accepted, for the love of God to us is never ending and rooted in grace that is free. It is given to us through and in Christ Jesus. Henri Nouwen wrote, "God is looking for you. God will go anywhere to find you. God loves you, and wants you home. God cannot rest unless you come in."

The parable ending does not give us the answer whether or not, the older brother came in to the house and got to party with his younger brother. I love how it stays that way, pointing to the reality of how complex and even full of pain the relationship between the siblings can be and also becoming an invitation. So, friends, for those of us who have a sibling, perhaps the invitation for us is to accept them as they are, for they are loved and accepted by God, and if necessary, forgive them, and if necessary, forgive ourselves.

And the invitation then, for all of us to accept the love of God for us in Christ Jesus, and perhaps stop earning that love, and just come in to the party.