
Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A sermon preached by Luke A. Powery on March 10, 2013 at Duke Chapel

I almost called this sermon “Lost.” But then that may have conjured up thoughts about a highly popular American television series that ran from 2004-2010 and includes elements of science fiction and the supernatural. The show “Lost” was so popular that the fan base or groupies were called Lostaways or Losties; they even created a fan website called Lostpedia. The series “Lost” followed the experiences of the survivors of a crash of a commercial passenger jet after they landed on a mysterious tropical island in the South Pacific Ocean somewhere and have to deal with such characters as the malevolent island inhabitants known as “the Others.” “Lost” had a following. “Lost” had fans. I don’t think the same is true of “Found.”

There is a fascination with disorientation. Many are captivated by the ways others are lost. This may be one of the reasons why certain reality tv shows are so popular. Lost has fans. Being lost has become fashionable and maybe even desirable. There is a focus on the family for sure—family dysfunction seems to be a core value where the storm is the norm—Keeping Up with the Kardashians, Hogan Knows Best, The Osbournes. In other words, lost lives in our homes. Lost makes big bucks for the television industry. Wandering and squandering appears to be good news. Lost, not found.

But I couldn’t name this sermon solely “Lost” because though that may be the human story it is not the entire gospel story. Thus the title of this gospel reality message is “Lost and Found.” Luke, the synoptic gospel preacher, helps us to understand this, but not only with the parable about the man who had a younger and elder son. We wouldn’t know it from the lectionary reading, but right before Jesus tells this parable, he tells two others: “Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’” “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’” Lost and found. Sheep/animals, coins/money, and people can be lost too.

The gospel does not deny this. The headlining lost soul in our parable is the younger son. He asks his father for his inheritance early, which went against all of the traditional wisdom and rules of that day. His request is basically an implicit wish for his father to die because that is when he would normally receive his inheritance. He wants to get all his possessions now for immediate gratification when we are told that a disciple gives up their possessions (14:33) and can’t “serve God and wealth”(16:13). This young man, who is not a model disciple, heads down the wrong path and to a “distant country” and wastes everything as he plays on the slot machines of sin. He wants to run as far away as possible from home, and distance himself from the way of living, being, and thinking, that was handed down to him. He wants to be footloose and fancy free so much so that he cuts his roots loose. But what he didn’t realize was that his roots formed a foundation for him and without them, he was lost.

So lost, so off target, so desperate, that he finds himself partying with Porky Pig and friends, willing to eat pigs’ pods. But “no one gave him anything,” not even the pigs. It was shameful enough for a Jewish boy to feed unclean pigs and become unclean himself by associating with them but not even the pigs were willing to share their food. He was lost. This young man failed and fell not because he aimed high and missed the mark but he aimed too low and hit the mark. We see this young son lose all his money and become like an animal; he is the lost sheep and lost coin. In the pig’s pit, “he came to himself.” He woke up to the reality of his lost cause at that point because some people have to hit the bottom of life’s pit before

they see the way out clearly. He hit so low that there was no place to go but up and back home. He was determined to “get up and go to [his] father” because he says that he’s “dying of hunger.” Yet, he was dead already. One of the walking dead. A young man in North Carolina, wandering and squandering. Lost.

I’m fully aware that the young son is not the only one lost in this story. I could talk about the ways in which the father is lost, pained, and made dead by the request of his baby boy which tears his family apart. I could talk about how the elder son is lost in his anger and cold resentment and perhaps never found in the story. How he can be at home and still be lost, never experiencing the joy of being home. How he’s in his own distant country at distance, estranged, from his family, done in by dotting every I and crossing every T, following every rule, yet not happy, a party pooper in his own home, revealing how one’s celebration can be another’s lament. I could talk about that but I’m not. One sermon cannot tell it all.

But what I will tell is how we do know that it is not just the young son, father, or elder son who can be lost. Aren’t we all lost at times even if it is just that we’ve lost our minds?! Many of us have squandered opportunities and money and relationships, all in pursuit of immediate gratification. We’ve constantly danced in the domain of dissatisfaction and so we leave home in pursuit of fulfillment because being home is not enough. We lose our way eventually and somehow find ourselves at the same party with Porky Pig and friends along with the young son, not really knowing how we even got there. How we landed at this place in life. We just know that we are lost and it seems as if no one is giving us anything but grief. Some of us have sought satisfaction and fulfillment in our work and network and net worth and education and power but we still are lost. And as we see in the story, the father’s love for the son allows him the freedom to find his life and even the freedom to get lost. God’s love for us has left us free to even leave home if we choose, because God’s love does not imprison us but frees us to journey, even if we end up being lost. God provides the freedom to fail and fall because we are not religious R2-D2 robots.

Yet, we are not lost because of God. We have become lost because we have left our spiritual home in God, wandering in a distant country and dry deserts where there is no water or pigs. At times, we lack the realization that our ultimate home is with God. We venture off to search for answers when God has been speaking all along in divine wisdom. We search for love away from God when God has shown on the cross that he’s dying to love you and me. We pursue another life apart from God and wind up lost, disoriented, and disconnected from our true home, from God. This lostness is a form of death. “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost but is found!” Dead, alive. Lost, found. To be lost is to be dead. When we lose ourselves, our roots, our home, we experience death and come close to being slaughtered with swine. Lost.

But remember, the gospel reality message is “lost and found.” What we find is the overwhelming thrust of how we are found in God, the Father. How our home is with God. This parable is traditionally known as one of the prodigal son but I think what we have is the prodigal father, a father who is extravagant and wasteful with his love and mercy, just like God. When he lays eyes on his lost son, he finds him while he is still “far off” and he has a gaze of love and is “filled with compassion” which is a deep visceral response (cf. 7:13). Compassion literally moves him as he runs to meet his son, puts his arms around him and kissed him. His son admits his sin but the father responds, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” Celebration is the appropriate response to finding that which was lost. The younger son recognized where he belonged—at home with his father.

And this reunion stirs joy at the fact of being found alive. It is a prodigal party where the father is the host. The father is not concerned about where the son was or what he was doing. He’s just glad to have him back home. There is the absence of judgment in the presence of love. Love is the constant and this divine love as represented by the father offends our sensibilities because the lost son does not get what he deserves. He gets grace for being greedy. The embrace of the younger son does not mean the rejection

of the elder. Love of tax collectors and sinners does not negate love for others as well. The father loved the two sons, goes out to both of them and is generous to both.

To be at home with God is to be in a place of joy and celebration, especially for the lost and found. To be found is to be in communion, a restored relationship with God. God's heart is for the lost and dying because his love is cruciform. It is a love that will not only wait for you but run to you when it sees you afar off. Though he was lost, the son knew the way back home to the father. The way that was paved with forgiveness on Mercy Boulevard, hope on Love Avenue, and faith on Grace Street. The road back to life led to the eternal love of God. He knew where home was and who was the host. He could be found again in the presence of the father.

And you can always go home. No questions asked. Nothing requested in return for God's love. He is the waiting, prodigal father. There's a party being prepared for you. Robes and rings and fatted calves. Music and dancing with festive communion of saints. Spiritual sounds of the cosmos as earth and heaven ring with the harmonies of God's love. And when you are found at home at last, you will kneel, as in Rembrandt's painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son," into the bosom of God who will embrace and bless you forever as you lean your tired head close to the heart of God as you hear his heart beat for you. Once you were lost but in God you are found.

You, who are tired of being lost, come on home. Come on home to a heavenly father waiting to be united with his beloved son and daughter. Come on home because you've been away for so long. Come on home, food and drink are prepared in your honor. Come on home, the music of the organ and steel drum has already begun for you. Come on home and put your dancing shoes on. Come on home so that you can be found again and begin again, so that you can sing again, "I was once lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."