Lost or Dead?

A meditation on Luke 15: 1 – 3, 11b – 32

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church March 31, 2019

Lost and found. Life and death. Which is worse: to be lost or to be dead? Is that a question we can answer?

This past week I was completing a scholarship reference for a seminary student. Sometimes when I am writing these, I start to panic a little…I worry about what someone would say if they had to answer these questions about me! “Have I done enough with my life?” I wonder…do I have *interesting* hobbies?? I have hobbies, but really, are they that interesting?? And then I realized getting lost is, if not one of my hobbies, at least an interesting quality. Maybe you could even call it a talent!

Once I left Nashville with a car full of fellow church educators to attend a conference in St. Louis. Except that I discovered that we were heading to Knoxville instead. We made it, but we lost a little time. Years earlier, leaving my sister’s home in Chicago, I gave us a two hour detour, with three little kids and my mother in the car. She later said, “I thought you missed an exit, but I didn’t want to say anything.” Argh…My mother had a built in compass. This is my mother giving directions: “Head east on Walnut Grove Road for 5 miles, then turn north.” “East?? Which way is east?? Is north to your right when heading east??”

It’s a good thing God moved me to a small town, at least there is less space in which to get lost. The first week I lived in Tuscaloosa I would get so turned around trying to find the church I was afraid it was a sign from above. I could see the stadium. I knew it had be a short block away, but what a tangle of streets. Before you suggest it, yes, I use GPS apps on my phone. I have Google maps, Waze, and whatever the unnamed map is on my IPhone. In my defense, the phone took me a different route each day. You would think there weren’t that many paths from Cottondale to 1127 8th Street. I think the GPS genies do things like this just to mess with your head. With a mischievous gleam in their eye, they say “Now that she has a false sense of security, let’s really confuse her!”

Have you ever made the mistake of having two mapping apps open at the same time? Two *different* voices telling you what to do and they don’t agree? It’s like being behind the wheel with two teenagers in the car. The biggest problem I have with Google maps or Waze is that they like to use *numbers*. “In 500 feet, turn right!” I’m not good with distances. Give me a land mark. I want someone to invent a map app that will say, “When you see a castle shaped building, turn left.” Or “when you come to the fork in the road, turn towards the cemetery.” And I don’t like interstate numbers. They mean nothing to me. I need road names. Rice Mine. Jack Warner. Lurleen Wallace. Who can forget names like that? They have stories. But 69? 20? 82? I’m lost before you begin. I can only remember 65 south because it takes you to the beach! We are all wired differently. Some of you would have loved my mother’s directions. Some of you can hear “500 feet” and see that distance in your mind. Not me. We need a variety of ways of hearing, a range of ways of seeing because we have myriad ways of being “lost.”

A father had two sons. Two unique sons. The father knew this. He knew that they would get lost in different ways. He knew that they required different forms of discipline. The older son only needed a stern look, or to hear the words, “I am so disappointed in you.” The younger son could be grounded for a week, lose his cell phone and laptop privileges, and still not feel the pain of his father’s frustration. And so, in the shadow of his older brother’s perfection, the younger son chose the wildest path he could imagine.

He asks for his share of the inheritance, which in effect is proclaiming his father’s death. What a strange and hurtful thing to do. And it isn’t because he wants to build a house, or go to graduate school or because he has a family of his own to support. He just wants to take the money and run. And his father lets him!! And we are screaming, “NO!! Don’t do it! Nothing good will come of this!” We are thinking, “That slacker dad, he’s going to have his eyes opened.”

Except that his eyes were *always* opened. He knew his son. He probably was not at all surprised when his son came to him asking for the money. Nor was he shocked by the outcome. He knew when his son headed out with pockets full of coins that nothing good could come of it. So why did he let him go? Because the son would have left anyway. In truth, his son had left long before he struck out towards the bright lights of the city.

We love to look at this story through rose colored glasses: a story of forgiveness and reunion. That is here, in miracle and mystery, but let’s be honest. When the younger son, covered in mud and pig slop, comes to his senses, it is just the first step. He isn’t fully aware of his condition. When he says, “My father’s servants have *more food* than they need,” it isn’t a compliment to a man who treats his servants with kindness. It is the revelation that he sees himself as above them, as more deserving. His eyes are not completely open yet. Until he can see himself, not in *competition*, but in *cooperation*, he will remain *lost*. We are left to wonder: will the younger son seek a different way of life? Has he truly been found…or is he lost to himself, lost to his family, lost to his community, lost to God? When will he understand that his father has love enough for both sons? It isn’t either/or it is both/and.

Both are invited to a party. Will both of them come? What would happen if these two brothers were allowed to meet? Aren’t you curious about that? Jesus keeps them apart! They never interact. If the older brother does clean up and come to the party, will he stand across the room, glaring at his younger brother from the corner, laughing about him with his friends? Will he haul him outside and punch him? Will he find a way to embrace him, even if it is a cold, meaningless embrace? Or will he find a way to forgive himself? Forgive himself for being jealous and resentful of a carefree younger sibling? Forgive himself for pushing him away? Will he finally be relieved of the heavy weight of responsibility that older siblings so often feel for the younger ones?

And what about you? Will you come to the party? If the father is your friend, your peer, your neighbor, do you want to celebrate the return of a son who hurt his father so deeply? Could you? Would you be afraid that you were condoning the son’s behavior? Theologian J. William Harkins writes, “All religions provide some means by which the sinner can return and make restitution, but to come back to a party? That, indeed, is a surprise. What kind of religion can this be? Would any of us have attended this party?”

In our limited way of understanding, our limited way of forgiving, our limited way of loving, the party doesn’t make sense. In fact, we resent it. We want the party to be for the older, obedient son. Give the younger son a cloth robe, a gold ring and woven sandals if you want to, but give the older son a silk robe, a ruby ring, and leather shoes. It is either/or for us. Until we admit we have been the younger son. Until we admit we have – on some occasion - turned our backs on love as we walked away from God’s home. Who among us has not – at some moment - been ungrateful and unaware of the abundance offered to us? Who hasn’t wasted opportunities to be loved?

The father knew what each son needed. The younger son wasted his money…fine foods, fancy clothes, whatever money could buy. When he returned home, his father gave him fine foods, fancy clothes, a little bling. *Why?* To show him that all these “things” he thought would make him happy had been there all along. All those possessions apart from the love of family? *They are absolutely meaningless.*

The older son? When his younger brother left, he didn’t have to share a room anymore. He didn’t have to make excuses for him when he snuck in after curfew. He didn’t have to be resentful or jealous of his ungrateful and foolish brother. He never left home, and *so it would seem he wasn’t lost.* The older son was not at risk of being lost until his father threw a party for his brother. That was the moment of great danger. That was the moment when he was forced to choose between resentment and forgiveness. The father’s invitation to his older son is the invitation to love expansively and generously, the invitation to reject bitterness.

The father takes bold risks in this story. He takes a risk by allowing one son to leave, and an every greater risk in welcoming him home. We don’t get to decide who God welcomes. We don’t get to choose who God forgives. God’s grace is both mysterious and wonderful. God’s mercy is both frightening and abundant. And, Harkins writes, the truth that often baffles and disturbs our minds is that *“we can fall from justice, we can fall from faith, we can fall from righteousness, but we cannot fall from grace.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

We might not be able to fall from grace, but I do believe we can lose our way in the midst of grace. So we must discern which voices are guiding us in truth. And we must acknowledge the value of community to help us in our discernment. Together we are better able to experience the depth of God’s wisdom, the wideness of God’s grace. Together, we are better able to embody that grace, to live it out in the world.

There was a funny thread on a friend’s Facebook page this week – it was about a local landmark, fondly referred to as “Jesus in a Box.” (Evidently it is actually the Good Shepherd, but same difference, really.) Directions were given for how to find him…straight up 43, *he’s on the left!* Other comments included: *“He’s a good bit out of town.”* Take that as you will. Evidently he is a local landmark: *“If you get to Jesus in a box, you’ve gone too far.”*

**That, as they say, will preach.** Jesus in a box is much less threatening. Much less threatening, but also much less forgiving, much less merciful. If your faith allows you to put Jesus in a box, you’ve gone too far. If we let him out, he will throw parties for anyone and everyone. *Even us.* I’ve always hated attending parties alone, but together? It’s so much better that way. I won’t be nearly as nervous if we go together. So shall we? Shall we go? Shall we go… together?

Let us give thanks to God, the host of love’s party. A come as you are extravaganza. Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.

1. Feasting on the Gospels; Luke, Vol. 2. Westminster John Knox Press. (2014) Cynthia A. Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson, eds.

Additional sources consulted: Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Year C; Texts for Preaching, Year C; Karoline Lewis, Working Preacher https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5307; Richard Swanson: A Provocation, Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)