

# Travel Stories: *The Lost Brothers* - wk 6

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Aug. 23, 2020  
Luke 15 *The Message paraphrase* - (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

In this series we're considering some of Jesus stories he told while walking from Galilee to Jerusalem. In these stories, we hear some of the most famous of Jesus' parables, including today's, which is possibly the most famous: The Prodigal Son story. For this sermon, I'll be drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell It Slant* and also his *Message paraphrase* of the Bible to help us capture some of what's happening in these stories.

Jesus is aware that there is one form of sin that flourishes among people in religious communities, far more than in the secular world. The common name for this sin is self-righteousness. In order for it to take root it requires a community in which righteousness is honored and pursued. Without a community in which righteous ways are practiced, honored and pursued, self-righteousness would not be possible. You might also call this moralism.

In a way, attending church puts us all at risk of this sin. Yet Jesus' regular habit of welcoming of disreputable people is a flat out rejection of moralism. Any longing for the safety of moralism will make you uneasy with Jesus' next two stories.

Luke places this story near the middle of Jesus journey through Samaria, and the story is sparked by Pharisees

and Bible scholars murmuring critically against Jesus. The people to whom Jesus is talking to on this trip are outsiders to the world of faith, Samaritan “tax collectors and sinners” (NRSV), unsavory people, disreputable people. The religious insiders complain that Jesus is treating unrighteous Samaritan riffraff with courtesy and hospitably. Their complaints trigger this story.

This is the setting that provokes Jesus’ most famous parable. Pharisees and Bible scholars are murmuring. In the midst of this grumbling Jesus tells four mini stories about things lost. You may have three story titles in your Bible, but note there are four lost things.

The first story counts one hundred sheep: one out of one hundred is lost. The shepherd goes looking for the one lost sheep, finds it, brings it home, and calls to his friends and family to rejoice with him.

The second story counts ten coins: one out of the ten is lost and the housewife goes looking for it, finds it, and calls her friends and family to rejoice with her.

The third story counts two sons: one out of the two is lost and the father waits for his return. The son does return, and the father throws a party of celebration. This third story is more elaborate than the first two: it includes the leaving and the homecoming. It has details of the getting lost, the conditions while lost, including the feelings of a broken relationship, and then the drama of the finding,

which is the homecoming. This is an amazing story. We are drawn in for a lost person gets more attention than a lost animal or a lost thing.

Another difference is that the father doesn't go out looking for the son in the same way that the shepherd looks for a sheep and the housewife looks for a coin. He doesn't go out looking, but he is looking all the time for when the son is returning. It says the father sees him a long way off and runs out to greet and welcome him. That is a wonderful image of God's running to welcome.

Do you remember this story? "The Prodigal Son" it's usually called. We don't go looking for a lost son (or person) in the same way that we look for an animal or a coin. Eugene Peterson says, something other than aggressive energy is required. It's passive energy that's needed. Eugene Peterson writes, *"Waiting provides the time and space for others to get in on salvation. Waiting calls a time-out, puts us on the sidelines for a while so that we don't interfere with essential kingdom-of-God operations that we don't even know are going on."*

It couldn't have been easy for the father to wait, to not go out looking for his lost son the way the shepherd looked for his sheep and the woman looked for her coin. Eugene Peterson says, not all lost sons and daughters and friends and "unsaved" can be found by calling out a search-and-rescue team. Sometimes what God wants us to do is wait.

If we connect this back to a prior story, we need to leave time for the Gardener's manure to work.

Now consider what Jesus has done with these three stories. The ratio intensifies. One out of a hundred sheep, one out of ten coins, then one out of two sons. In each case there is a successful recovery of what is lost. In each case a celebration follows with glad rejoicing.

These simple stories, as Eugene points out, do their work in us, because we applaud. We can identify with these everyday types of activities. A lost pet, a lost ten dollar bill, a lost or runaway child. We cheer with the people in these stories when the lost are found.

But were the murmuring Pharisees and Bible scholars applauding? Yes, in fact, they probably know from experience having lost and found things, having been lost and found themselves, so as the elite in their community they were probably careful to applaud also. They're applauding, so watch this, with their self-righteous defenses down, Jesus slips in a fourth story.

This is the story of another lost son. But this son is triple lost: lost to his father, lost to his brother, and lost to the celebrating community. A son who has never done anything overtly wrong, who has kept all the rules, who has worked hard on the farm. And then this: the father, who has spent years waiting for the return of the younger

son, immediately goes out looking for this son, finds him and urges him, pleads with him to join the celebration.

Eugene Peterson says the Greek verb is *parakalei*. It's a *coming alongside, wooing, inviting, welcoming, encouraging word* that draws us into the singing and feasting and congratulating community of the lost and found. This is notably also the verb that is associated primarily with the Holy Spirit, called the Paraclete in Greek: God coming alongside us, drawing us into the community of the lost and found.

Different than the first three lost and found stories, Jesus doesn't provide a conclusion to the fourth story. The first three stories are: lost, search, found, celebrate. The fourth is: lost, search, found. There is no closure, no celebration. We don't know whether the brother lets himself be found and participate in the celebration. It's a story without an ending.

Which does what? It invites the listener or reader to finish the story. It also invites the listener into the story because in this fourth story there is only one lost. Only one we want found and one we want to go celebrate. Jesus' silence must have been uncomfortable. Jesus' not finishing the story, not finishing the pattern like the first three stories, must have been uncomfortable.

In the fourth story, the brother didn't have any sense that he was lost. But since we already know the story, we can

so quickly finish the story for him. The Father commanded, *“Go inside, celebrate. Your brother has been found, he’s alive in your father’s family. And you are too, so go celebrate!”* Since we can so quickly finish it in that way, I think Jesus’ silence allows the Holy Spirit time to help us find ourselves in this lost story.

Really, us? Church people lost? But we’re at church? We volunteer? We want to sing, worship, and be part of what God is doing. But, we can still be lost. Religious observance can be the thing that makes us think we’re at the celebration with the Father, when we could actually be outside like the older brother. We’re the ones who have been here serving, we can’t be the ones lost. However, the Father wants to teach us that it is not religious acts that He desires, but an inward deep relationship with Him. That is what God is longing for with us.

You see self-righteousness in large part exists when we pick it up in church, sitting in a church pew, singing hymns and reading the Bible, and doing good works “in Jesus’ name.” The reality of Jesus’ story is that Jesus is really out looking for us. We are as lost as any wandering sheep, as any dropped coin, as any prodigal son, if we have a relationship with church, but not with our Heavenly Father.

Self-righteousness is merely a relationship with self, while righteousness comes through a relationship with God. Tell

me about your relationship with God. How is that different from someone else's relationship with God?

I've heard it said we can read the Gospel According to Luke, the Gospel According to Matthew, Mark and John, but if we haven't the Gospel According to *you* - how you know God - then we might have missed the relationship amidst the religion. We might be lost, even as we declare that we've been found.

Tell me the Gospel from your perspective. Gospel means good news. What good news do you have to tell from knowing God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is in your life? If we can't express our own personal good news about Jesus, we might be the self-righteous lost, even as we serve in "Jesus name."

Could you write the Gospel According to You, the Gospel According to Amy, the Gospel According to Bill, the Gospel According to Bob? Not that you would get every theological point, or *jot and tittle* correct, but that you would have such a meaningful relationship with your Heavenly Father that you:

- could write a book or letter about it.
- would be able to write from the *celebration of the lost & found*.
- could tell of the Holy Spirit's *coming alongside, wooing, inviting, welcoming and encouraging* you to

join in the singing, feasting, and congratulating of the *lost & now found community*.

This story slowly goes to work when we ask, “*Am I going to go in and celebrate with all the other disreputable, ragamuffin people God has invited to the celebration?*”

Would you pray with me?

*Dear God,*

*We are thankful You not only forgive us, (1 John 1:9) but that You wash us clean (1 John 1:9)*

*and set our feet in a new place. (Ephesians 2:6)*

*When we receive You as our Lord and Savior, we are born again (John 3:1-21) by Your Spirit and You now call us a new creation. (2 Cor. 5:17)*

*Because You sees us through the blood of the Lamb, we are holy, (Heb 10:10) and have become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)*

*Oh God, what a privilege You have given us.*

*Our great God, we are humbled by Your mercy and grace toward us,*

*You have changed our spiritual positions from sinners to saints (Romans 5:6-8, 1:7)*

*and priests to our God. (Rev 1:6, Rev 5:10)*

*Help us Jesus become now in our conduct what You have given us by position.*

*Thank Lord Jesus for Your unimaginable sacrifice on our behalf!*

*In Jesus Name, Amen*