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Lost Along the Way (Luke 15.1-2, 11-32)

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Well, what could possibly be said about *this* parable that hasn't been said before? Certainly that thought crossed my mind when I realised it was the reading set for tonight's service. But then almost immediately, I found myself getting interested, noticing things in this text that I'd never noticed before, and wondering what that might mean for each of us and for Benedictus? I'll be interested in your thoughts when we get to talk at the end of the service.

First, some background.

In terms of the setting for story in Luke's gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. It's the original "Lenten" journey, a very deliberate pilgrimage that Luke highlights much more than the other gospel writers; in fact, it's often called 'the travel narrative'. As Jesus travels this way, Luke emphasises his role as prophet responding to three distinct groups of people:

- there's a growing group of 'disciples' (*mathētēs*)—the learners; the followers; these are Jesus's supporters
- and then there's 'the crowd' (the Gk. word '*ochlos*' occurs 18 times in this section)— they're open, often impressed, they're drawn to Jesus but they're not yet committed, they're still agnostic
- and finally there's '*the Pharisees and the scribes*'—the opposition, these powerful men are the grumblers and the critics, they don't like Jesus and they're not afraid to voice it

As Jesus travels this road to Jerusalem, Luke is very careful to note which group he is talking to, and here, it's the latter— the Pharisees and the scribes. *'Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling...'* Grumbling because Jesus was *'welcoming sinners'*, a very unbecoming action for a prophet (in the Pharisee's book), for these were the religious law-breakers, the no hopers, the lost ones. If Jesus were a prophet, then he should be condemning them, not welcoming and eating with them, as he seemed so keen to do.

So Jesus tells them a parable.

Actually, as Luke structures it, he tells three parables, and they all have to do with "lostness", and with being found. There's the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and then there's our parable, the parable of the lost... *well...* son, I guess, or prodigal son, but you know, I'm not so sure that that is the right title anymore?? Let me say some more.

The thing that strikes me this time as I read this chapter is how different this parable is from the other two. In the first two, the structure and language has a distinct pattern and resonance:

Parable 1: a shepherd has one hundred sheep, loses one, goes out searching, finds the lost sheep, brings it home, calls his friends and neighbours together and celebrates, saying, *'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost'*. So too, in heaven, says Jesus, there will be more joy *'over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'*

Parable 2: a woman has ten silver coins, loses one, sweeps the house searching, finds the lost coin, calls her friends and neighbours together and celebrates, saying, *'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost'*. *'Just so, I tell you,'* says Jesus, *'there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'* It's slightly different, there's no mention of

those who *'need no repentance'* this time, and that I do think is significant, but apart from that, it's very similar.

Then we come to parable 3. Here: a man has *two* sons, loses one, well... yes and no... he does lose him, in the sense that the son is *lost* to him, but actually in the story, it's more a case of *letting him go*. Remember, the son asks for his inheritance, an inappropriate thing to do in any society (and *especially that one*), and the Father obliges. There's no protest about this, he doesn't reprimand his son for such a callous request, there are no dire warnings, no signs of heartbreak or offense taken, he just divides the property and gives this son his share—almost as if he's encouraging him, as if he knows this has to happen, that this son *must* leave, must take this journey, must fall and be humiliated, must come to himself, and find his own way home.

Is this a fair thing to say? If I'd said it to the youth group when I was a youth minister, I'd have lost my job by the end of the week—every parent in the church would've been on my case! And, maybe I'm wrong, but you know, when I look at the text in context, it really seems to suggest the need for a consciousness-raising journey.

So, a very different "feel" to the first two parables. And the differences continue, for unlike the shepherd in the first parable and the woman in the second, this father does *not* search for his son—does nothing to remedy his loss. If he searches for anyone in this story, it's for his *elder* son, the one who never left home but who refuses to join his brother's welcome home party. In the text it says the father *'came out and began to plead with him'*.

But not the younger one, no, *this* son is released. The father lets him go, lets him get lost and fall and get humiliated and come to himself, lets him come home. Never once does he go out searching, he stays at home, and for a time, fades from the story... as God does in many of our stories.

When this young prodigal does finally return, well then, its game on! His Father, we're told, sees him a long way off and is filled with compassion—stirred in the guts. He runs to greet him, very unbecoming for a middle-eastern father but a stunning and moving image—so free and unencumbered, so forgiving and delighted. He *runs* to his son, wraps his arms around him and kisses him. The penitent waif begins his rehearsed confession and the father stops him mid-sentence, he doesn't need to hear this, he can see it. There were no recriminations when this son left and there are none now. *'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one'*, the father yells to the servants, *'put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet'*, *kill the fatted calf and set the table for a feast!* This father is elated, overjoyed, his son... his *lost* son has done his journey, has woken up and he's back. That's what matters. He's back! He's found himself, found his way home and he's *here!* How good is that!!!

You hear that, you who keep looking down you're your nice clean noses at the sinners (remember the audience), he's back!! It's great news, worth celebrating, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. On this point, the three parables align once more—there is rejoicing when lost ones are found or return.

But this this parable has one more diverging strand, one last twist in the tale, and it's all to do with the *elder* son – the dutiful one and upright one (the one who has acts in ways remarkably similar to the Pharisees and scribes). It's true; this son never wandered off, never openly abused his position, never left his father in the lurch, never squandered his possessions or did any of the naughty things he accuses his brother of (not that he actually refers to him as *brother*, just *'your son'*). No, he's the successful one, with much effort no doubt, he has managed to keep his life together, to colour between the lines, to learn the rules and keep them. Like a lot of elder sons (and daughters) he's done the "right" thing, or so he likes to think, and guess what...? He is

alienated. Just like the Pharisees, and many in the church, and many others who think they have it all together...

He's clearly alienated from his brother; he won't even refer to him as a brother, let alone celebrate his return to the fold. And, despite his moral rectitude and obedience, he also seems alienated from his Father, *'I've been working like a slave for you... and you've never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends'*, he says resentfully. *A slave??* It's hardly the sign of peaceable relationship. Besides, his father had given him plenty. He too had been given his inheritance if you read the text (v.12), which, in those days, would have been a significantly bigger share than his brother's.

All these are signs, I'd suggest, that he's actually alienated from *himself*; that he's unconscious of the attitudes and habits that are diminishing his life and relationships.

You know... as hard as it is to go through a crash... as painful and devastating as it usually is, sometimes it's easier to come to truth of ourselves when life does come unstuck in some way—when we fail or fall (as the younger son did), when we can no longer kid ourselves we're better than others. Then were open to the truth, humble enough to ask and accept forgiveness and help.

There's no question that this parable, like the other two, speaks of the God who rejoices when the lost are found. And, like the other two, it's not *how* they get lost that matters, just that they're eventually found.

The surprising, and devastating, thing about this third parable is the way it challenges our view of *who's lost*. Yes, the younger son was lost *and found*, but what of the older brother? What's his condition?

He may have lived less indulgently, channelling his energies into an impressive moral performance, but was he really any less wilful than his younger brother, any less self-centred? *'Externally focussed morality... is in grave danger of*

terminating in itself,' says Rowan Williams, 'in the successful will, [and] not in the life of the creator.'¹ This certainly seems to be the case with this elder brother, and if it is, then he is lost?

Did he eventually come in and join that party, accept his father's invitation, or did he die in refusal, grumbling and miserable, casting aspersions on others and missing all the fun? We don't know. And that, I suggest, is another sign of Jesus's masterful storytelling—to leave it dangling; tantalising us with a question that eventually becomes personal. What about me?

What's *my* status when it comes to being lost and found?

Am I locked in refusal? Or reality...??

This is ridiculous, here I am dying of hunger, and yet even my father's hired hands have bread to spare.... I know what I will do... I'll get up and go to my father...

¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, Backwell Publishers, 2000) p. 261.