

# The Fourth Sunday in Lent

## Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

### March 31, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### The Father Has Compassion Even at a Distance

The idea of a lost and found box doesn't make any sense to me. We have this description of these places in American English where lost items are stored until their rightful owners come looking for them. That part is fine. It's the name I object to. Why lost *and* found? Everything in the "lost and found" is by definition lost. It is not found until the owner comes to



claim it. Just because another person happened upon a glove or piece of jewelry or some other article that once belonged to someone else does not make it found. It's still lost. For something to be found implies ownership.

Better I think is the British English equivalent of the "lost property box" or office. That name is self explanatory. Clearly this is a place where lost items are located, awaiting reunification with the ones who have misplaced them. According to Wikipedia one of the most interesting "lost property" offices is run by Transport for London, the agency responsible for subways and buses in that city. Lost items include wedding dresses, ashes in an urn, a long case clock, a kitchen sink, and several wheelchairs.

Of course to lose something does not necessarily mean to misplace it like you might lose a set of car keys. Sometimes lost things leave of their own accord, and they are lost because they are missed. Such is the case in our familiar Gospel reading from St. Luke. It has been traditionally called “the parable of the prodigal son” which comes from marginal titles in 16th century English Bibles. But I think the traditional German title “*Der verlorene Sohn*,” or “the lost son,” better expresses the relationship of this parable to the other two parables in the 15th chapter of Luke. Those deal with the lost sheep and the lost coin. Here we are dealing with a different sort of loss, for the son leaves his father and in that leaving is lost.

But even that title is misleading, for the parable is not really about the son. It is about the father. To understand this we need to look at the first three verses from our reading which start the entire sequence of three parables. “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ <sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable” (Lk 15:1–3). Now it is true that the people who are drawn to Jesus are not the cream of the crop, at least in the eyes of the religious authorities. Jesus has been teaching about the Kingdom of God, repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Guess what? Sinners need to hear those words, not the righteous. So he tells these parables to the Pharisees and scribes who are not happy that Jesus is gathering those lost in their sins and offering them forgiveness. Jesus wants the gathered religious authorities to know that the heavenly Father delights when lost sinners are found through the very Words that He brings.

So Jesus begins: ““There was a man who had two sons” (Lk 15:11). You see? The story is not about the son, not even about the sons, but about the father. For the father in this parable shows mercy and favour in a way that was inconceivable to that culture. It still is today. And the father does this not just once, but three times. The first time is right in the beginning. “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me’” (Lk 15:11–12).

Basically the son says to the father, “Dad, I wish you were dead and buried. I want what is coming to me and I want it now!” This would be the most outrageous request any son could make of their father in first-century Palestine — or really in our own culture today. The son wants the father to sell off whatever assets he would have divided up in his will and then dispose of the money, probably one third to the younger son, two thirds to the older son. This type of request never happened. It was impossible. But look: the father does what his son asks! The community would have thought this an act of generosity beyond compare, a unique, marvellous, divine action not done by any father in the past. Ever. So we shouldn’t skip over this first part of the parable, because it’s all about the father.

The next section is the part we are most familiar with. The son takes his money and he leaves town in search of fame, fortune, and fun. Or something. We don’t know his motivations for sure, but we see the end results of his selfishness and short-sightedness. In a “far country...he squandered his property in reckless living” (Lk 15:13). Now things go from bad to worse when famine hits and there is little to go around. So the son does the unthinkable. He attaches himself to a citizen in that country who must be a Gentile because he owns pigs. Then he places himself in a position to actually feed the swine,

rendering himself unclean and an outcast. He is so desperate that he would even eat the food meant for the pigs. Talk about rock bottom!

All of this because he had spent everything, which he had greedily desired from his father.

And now in this state of desperation he takes the first step toward repentance and

reconciliation. He comes to his senses. Where else can he go but back to his father?

What else can he do except throw himself before his father's feet and beg for mercy and

forgiveness? He didn't deserve it. Quite the opposite. But he trusted in the father's

mercy, and so made his way back thinking about how he would even offer himself as a

servant — anything but staying with the pigs.

But remember, it's all about the father, and now here is the second instance of the father's

gracious mercy. For the father sees him approaching from a distance “and felt

compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). Here is the heart of

the story, and the big surprise for the Pharisees and scribes who were listening. The son

says in repentance, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer

worthy to be called your son” (Lk 15:21). But Jesus' description of the father's actions is a

description of complete and total grace. The father wants his son back.

The father desires a celebration. “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put

a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let

us eat and celebrate” (Lk 15:22–23). Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a picture

of how God welcomes back us sinners. Though we like the young son surely don't

deserve it, he welcomes us back as honoured guest at a banquet feast, robed in the

righteousness of Christ through our Baptism. And at the centre of the feast to which we

are welcomed is not the fattened calf but the Lamb of God who is slain and sacrificed.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Co 5:21). Today your restoration to the community of the Lamb comes through His table, by feasting on His very Body and Blood.

It’s all about the Father. Now there is a third example of the father’s mercy in this parable, which we might also overlook because of the powerful statement of repentance and forgiveness we just heard. But let us not forget about the older son. Is he pleased that the younger son has come to his sense and returned to the father? No he is not. His father invites him to the celebration, “But he was angry and refused to go in” (Lk 15:28). How is this at all fair? Shouldn’t he get what is coming to him? Is this what he gets for wickedness? Isn’t this just another form of cheap grace? Where is the price to be paid? Well, that’s what repentance is. We get something we don’t deserve. The younger son is not rewarded for wickedness, but for returning home. Not for sin, but for repentance. Not for evil, but for conversion. In our repentance we are faced with all of our sins and iniquities with which we have offended God and justly deserve his temporal and eternal punishment. But then in faith we receive the gift of grace, the mercy of forgiveness won for us. Not because of our sin, but in spite of it. Not for our sake, but for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes there is a price to be paid, but Christ Jesus has paid it in full on the cross with His very blood for “<sup>12</sup>he entered once for all into the holy places...by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12).

The older son also rejects his father because, like those Pharisees and scribes, he is looking for righteousness in the wrong place. Even still, the father now shows mercy to the older

son: “You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Lk 15:31). You see, there is nothing we can do to make up for our sins, just as the son could not make up for his transgressions. It’s all about the Father. Our heavenly Father greatly rejoices when he sees those who were lost obtaining salvation. If there ever was a box appropriately named “lost and found” then we would all be in it. St. Paul writes to the Colossians: “<sup>13</sup> And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup> by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col 2:13–14). For like the prodigal son we were once lost in our sins, but we have been seen even while we were at a distance from our heavenly Father, and now we are found in Christ. For receives sinners, and He eats with them. Thanks be to God. Amen.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo Gloria