

The Lostness In All of Us

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 15:1-32

Luke Chapter 15 is maybe the most interesting chapter in the Bible. I have to guard myself when I say that because for me it is certainly one of my most favorite chapters in the Bible. But I think I can say with some subjectivity that it is perhaps the most interesting chapter in the Bible and for many reasons. One – there is no other chapter like it. There are three parables in this chapter offered by Jesus – and we find these parables in no other Gospels. They are three parables that in many respects say the same thing. It's almost as if Jesus is repeating himself to make a point. And one of the parables, The Parable of the Prodigal Son as it is traditionally called -- perhaps along with the Good Samaritan – another parable found only in Luke – is the most repeated story in all the Bible. The story of an independent wayward boy who gets himself in trouble and comes crawling back home only to be met by the embrace of a loving father and a crowd of friends ready to celebrate his safe arrival and an older brother who can't seem to get himself on the same page.. Usually for the sake of time and efficiency we preachers choose just one of these parables to preach upon – as I have plenty of times – but it may be that we are missing the point. Luke has it in his mind that Jesus told these stories back to back and maybe for a reason. So this morning we will listen to the whole chapter and then wonder what Jesus is trying to tell us.

Luke 15:1-32

When I was eight years old I was invited to attend my best friend Earl's seven year old birthday party. Seven or eight of us boys were invited to a party at his house and when we arrived Earl's mother

wasn't quite ready so she suggested we go out and take a little walk around the block to get us out of her hair while she finished up the preparations for the party. So we did. But the walk turned into something more than just a walk around the block. One thing led to another and someone suggested a neat playground to play at – and thought he knew where that playground might be. We made a couple wrong turns, but we finally figured out where it was. And then we took some time to play on this playground. And then we realized that the sun was starting to go down and maybe we should make our way back home. Remember now this was just supposed to be a walk around the block. We were now gone at least an hour. So we began our way back ... but we didn't know where we were going. It was getting darker now, real dark. We made one bad turn which led to another bad turn. And we didn't know where we were going. It was now completely dark. And now we were getting scared. We kept walking. And before we knew it we began to recognize some houses and some street names and finally by God's grace we got back to Earl's house. When we walked up to the house we couldn't figure out why there were police cars in the driveway. When we walked into the house we couldn't figure out why all our parents were there. Never have I seen expressions of such joy and relief and anger all wrapped into one. Needless to say this was the end of the party.

It isn't hard to get lost.

I told you a couple weeks ago about my brother Jimmy – four years older than me, severely mentally impaired – never spoken a word in his life. At the age of 8 he was placed in a school for profoundly impaired children. Not long after Jimmy took residence in this school – one night the staff were making their evening bed checks and found Jimmy's bed empty. They searched the room, he wasn't there. They searched the wing, he wasn't there. They searched the floor, he wasn't there. They searched the building, he wasn't there. They called the police they called the fire department.

“Don't you wonder if Jesus, while he is on this roll of lostness stories...is that there might be a fourth story and a fifth story and sixth story. And those stories would be our stories. Our stories of lostness?”

They searched the grounds, he wasn't there. They commenced a perimeter search beyond the grounds. Finally a fireman walking gently through the woods heard the sound of quiet crying. He raised his flashlight and found huddled next to a tree a little boy, a scared shivering little boy who was lost. No words to say he was lost. And so they wrapped him in a blanket and took him home. And everyone rejoiced. The lost boy was found.

It isn't hard to get lost.

Don't you wonder if that isn't the reason why Jesus tells us these three stories one after another? Three stories of getting lost. One a sheep, one a coin, and one a boy. The sheep we can imagine nibbles himself to getting lost. You know sheep – one blade of grass leads to another blade of grass, one good pasture leads to another good pasture and before you know it you look up and there's nobody around. Before you know it, you're lost. Didn't plan on getting lost – you just did.

The coin gets lost likely because someone stopped paying attention to it. Coins don't nibble away or run away – they just get overlooked. Someone puts them down and doesn't remember where – or maybe a little brush to the side and a fall off the table and a roll into the corner and before you know it that valuable silver dollar is nowhere to be found. Lost due to lack of attention.

And the boy gets lost because he thinks he knows where he is going. Typical male – won't ask for directions. Takes the family loot and knows there's a better life out there somewhere. But one wrong turn leads to another wrong turn and before he knows it there he is, a good Jewish boy in a pig sty feeding pigs and wishing he had the food the pigs were eating. And wondering, I suspect, how did I get here? How did I get from my father's house to here?

It isn't hard to get lost.

A corporate executive sits in his car getting ready to go to work. Before he turns the ignition he thinks back to when he graduated from college and interviewed for his first job. And from there it was a nibbling from one promotion to another, a nibbling from one company to another and now he's sitting in his car dreading to go to work because he doesn't like what he does and he doesn't like what it does to him. It isn't hard to get lost.

A fourteen year old girl doesn't feel like anyone at home is paying much attention to her. Her parents are fighting. Her brother thinks she's ugly. Her grandparents think she's bad. And no one seems to see the light inside her. And she falls off the table and rolls into the corner. She starts cutting herself and stealing her parent's whiskey and hanging around anyone who will pay attention to her. It isn't hard to get lost.

A thirty year old man working in the family business couldn't be more different than his father and brother. They think one way, he thinks another. And more importantly he thinks he can build a better widget than they can. "Buy me out," he tells them, "and I'm going to show you how it's done". So they buy him out – and he takes the family money and opens up shop on the other coast. But who would have expected the great recession. Who would have expected the rising cost of steel? Who would have expected the real estate market to crash? And now he's foreclosed and working at McDonald's. It isn't hard to get lost.

Don't you wonder if Jesus, while he is on this roll of lostness stories, one story, two stories, three stories, don't you wonder if what he wants to suggest is that there might be a fourth story and a fifth story and sixth story. And those stories would be our stories. Our stories of lostness? Why would the story of the lost son and the loving father be so popular, so familiar to twenty centuries of people? Maybe because there is a little bit of lostness in all of us? Is that possible? There's a little bit of lostness in all of us?

Remember Ernest Hemingway's little short story about the Spanish father and son who had grown estranged. The boy had run away to Madrid to get away from his father. After too many years the father was led to reconcile. So he put an ad in the Madrid newspaper – "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana. Noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa" And when Tuesday comes the father goes to the square in front of the hotel and finds eight hundred young men named Paco looking for their fathers.

There's a little bit of lostness in all of us. Maybe we've nibbled our way there. Maybe someone stopped paying attention to us. Maybe we stopped asking for directions. But we've all managed along the way, haven't we, to get ourselves a little off course, a little bit in a pickle, a little in over our heads. And who even today can say they have a clear view of what is down the road and around the bend? There's a little bit of lostness in all of us.

And so it is interesting isn't it that when Jesus tells these stories of the lost being found – that they all end with a party. The shepherd calls together his friends and neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." The woman calls together her friends and neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." And the father kills the fatted calf and strikes up the band and brings the whole town together to do the Cupid Shuffle for this son of mine was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found. And don't you wonder if the folks out there on the dance floor doing the Cupid Shuffle – are the folks who know what lostness is about. Folks who know how easy it is to take a wrong turn. To get pushed off the table. Because they've got inside some lostness. And they know the joy of the foundness.

And maybe, just maybe, that's why that older brother can't bring himself into the party? He can't quite see the lostness inside of him. He can't quite see that this air of superiority – this air of self-righteousness – this air of moral relativity – has got him quite lost! That the lost brother has been found – and that the found brother has been lost.

It's one of the great struggles of the spiritual life, right? That to the degree we sense that by God's grace we have been claimed by the loving embrace of Jesus Christ – and that on Sunday mornings we get to come inside the banquet hall and do the Cha Cha Slide – is the degree to which we can forget how easy it is for us still to get lost. And how easy it is for someone else to get lost. And it isn't far from there to begin playing the blame game. Well, if they would just get their act together. Or if they would have just done it right like me. And before we know it we're outside with that older brother with arms crossed and scowls across our face and saying, "What's this world coming to?" And we can't quite see that we're the ones outside the party.

A few years ago a dear friend of mine who served as one of the groomsmen in our wedding took his life. He suffered for years with episodes of clinical

depression and struggled with some bad choices and some dead ends. And tragically he saw no other option than to end his life. Now he was one of my groomsmen because he had been my high school youth director. He had taken me under his wing and embodied for me the unconditional love of Christ. He kept me on a good path. So many of the good memories of my youth include his presence. But along the way he got lost. It's not hard to get lost. And I suppose there are parts of his journey that folks could judge from afar. And judge harshly. And I suspect many did. Elder brothers shaking their heads. Easy to do when you don't see the light that is inside. Easy to do when you don't know what a difference he'd made in a lot of people's lives. Easy to do when you don't understand how vulnerable you are to slipping off the road yourself.

Maybe that's why Luke remembers to tell us that when Jesus told these stories of lostness – he was sitting down at Johnny's Bar and talking with the prostitutes and the pick pockets. Really? said the Pharisees. Really? Prostitutes? Pick pockets? Really, Jesus says. Because it isn't hard to get lost. And it is so good when you get found.



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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell
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Church of the Palms

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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323