

Two Lost Sons
2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:11b-32
March 25, 2007

Last week a twelve year old Boy Scout survived three frigid nights in the rugged North Carolina wilderness after getting lost on a camping trip. On the fourth day his scent was picked up by a dog. Michael was found alive with a few cuts and scratches. He was taken to the hospital, where he feasted upon chicken fingers and cookies.¹ Undoubtedly there was great rejoicing in McGrady, North Carolina upon the recovery of the lost boy.

There is more than one way of getting lost. We can become geographically disoriented and lose our way, as did the Boy Scout. The younger son in this morning's parable illustrates another way of getting lost. He goes astray morally. The story tells of a series of significant ways in which he veers off course. On the surface they may not seem as strange to our culture, but his actions have deep impact in the first century Middle Eastern culture in which he lives.

According to Jewish custom, a younger son would receive one third of the father's estate. The property could be divided before the father's death, but it was not to be disposed of prior to the father's death. By immediately selling his share of the inheritance, the younger son treats his father as if he is dead. He no longer has any means of caring for his father in case the need arises. The father has no remaining property, for it has been given to his two sons; he becomes dependent upon the elder son. The younger son violates the commandment to honor one's father and mother. His actions are extremely disrespectful of his father and their faith tradition.

The son further estranges himself by mismanaging the money in a Gentile land. When he falls into poverty, instead of turning to the Jewish community for help, he associates with a Gentile, a Roman pagan. He makes his living in a manner that was sinful for his culture. Feeding pigs was an abomination to the Jews. He is lost – morally, socially, and spiritually.

In the mire of the swine pen he begins his return. He recognizes that he no longer has any claim on his father. He no longer has a right to be called a son. He does not have any grand visions of being restored to the family which he disowned. He is sharp enough that to realize that the day laborers his father hires are better off than he is in the pig pen. He resolves to return to his father, confess his sin, express his remorse, and ask to work as a hired hand.

Not only has the son broken with his father and family; he has also alienated himself from his community. The villagers looked upon the son with great shame for the way he treated his father. Agrarian communities are close knit. The villagers are very protective of the father who has been disgraced by his son.

From our Western perspective we assume that the father has long been awaiting his son's homecoming and runs out to meet him out of his joy. There is undoubtedly joy, but there is more to the father's running embrace. In ancient Palestine it was unbecoming for a grown man to run. Hiking up flowing robes lacks dignity; it inappropriately exposes his legs to public view, and causes dishonor. The father runs to protect his son from the hostile villagers. By greeting his son before others can get to him, he preempts any other unfriendly reaction. He signals his own joy with a kiss, which is a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. The best robe in the house would have been the one worn by the father on ceremonial occasions. The ring may have been a signet ring, a symbol of authority. Shoes are a sign of a free man; slaves went barefoot.² The kiss, robe, ring, and shoes are symbolic ways of informing others that the son is accepted as a member of the family, not as a servant or hired hand. He wants to save his son the scorn of the community.

Teaching this story one day in Sunday School, the teacher asked, "Who wasn't happy when the youngest son came home?" After a moment of silence, one little girl raised her hand. "The fatted calf," she answered.

The fatted calf was not a daily entrée in first century Palestine. There was no refrigeration so cooked meat would spoil quickly if not eaten right away. The animals prepared for meals were chosen according to the number of people at the meal. If only one guest was anticipated, a dove or chicken might be served. If two guests were expected, maybe a duck. But to prepare the fatted calf means to plan a meal for the whole village. The father wants the entire community to come and celebrate the homecoming of his son. Reconciliation between his son, family, and community means more to him than his own honor. The son who had alienated himself from his family, village, and faith is restored by the gracious reception of his father.

The word prodigal has two meanings. The most common is "reckless" and "wasteful," and is typically applied to the son who squandered his inheritance. The second, less common meaning for prodigal is more positive. It is "extravagant, generous, or luxuriant." In this sense, the father is the prodigal. He offers extravagant, generous, profuse forgiveness and love to his wandering, wayward son. His son was going to

ask to be treated like a servant, but the father fully embraced him again as a son.

But as I noted earlier, there is more than one way of being lost. Here enters the elder son. When the estate was divided, as the eldest he received a double portion of the father's property. All that is left of his father's property belongs to him.

When he learns of the homecoming party, he refuses to enter the house. He separates himself from his family. His refusal to enter the house is an insult to his father. No one has asked him to use his resources to throw a party for his rebellious brother. No one consulted him about welcoming this unruly man into his household.

Just as the father went out to meet the younger son, the father goes out to talk with the elder son. The elder son vents his anger. With his abrupt command, "Listen," instead of addressing his father as "Father," he refuses to acknowledge his relationship with his parent. Neither does he claim his relationship to his brother, referring to him as "this son of yours."

Demonstrating the injustice, he pleads his merit and the younger son's disobedience. Although obedient to the law, he seems to have done so with great resentment. The elder son is lost in anger. He is consumed with a desire for revenge. He stubbornly wallows in self-serving indignation, cutting himself off from his family and his father's love. He is spiritually and emotionally lost.

The elder son is caught up in a win-lose worldview. "I've followed the law. I've been a faithful son and a responsible steward of the property entrusted to his care. I've done it the right way. This son of yours messed up. He's been a reckless, irresponsible, and good-for-nothing scalawag. He doesn't deserve to be treated like a family member again. He hasn't earned the right to be a part of this community. He's done it all wrong. He deserves to lose – and I deserve to win."

But the father doesn't think in terms of win-lose relationships. His love is not either/or. The father's love is both/and. The embrace of the younger son does not necessitate rejection of the older son. The Father's love is great enough to include both sons, as different as they are.

This is the nature of God's love. Jesus' love for tax collectors and sinners does not at all negate his love for the Pharisees and scribes. If we are honest, this dynamic is hard to swallow. Our sense of right is violated by this kind of extravagant example of instant, no-strings-attached forgiveness. We feel that in order for justice to be done, there must be winners and losers. Some are right and some are wrong. Some are included and others are excluded. We deserve to be awarded according to our merits. Otherwise it

is not fair. It comes from a worldview of scarcity, as if there is only so much love to go around. What another person gains, I lose.

But what we learn from the father is that God operates from a worldview of abundance. There is enough love for the reckless, yet repentant younger son. And there is love enough for the righteous, responsible elder son. The father loves both sons, but not because they deserve it nor have earned it. It is simply in the nature of the father to love his sons. It's about who the father is, not about what the sons have done. Being reconciled is more important than being right.

Reunion is more important than division. Cooperation is more honorable than competition. Reconciliation tops righteousness. It's a lesson we are still learning in our families, our communities, our workplaces, our churches, our nation. There is enough grace for both sons, for all parties to experience the fullness of blessing. The father is like God and God desires that the church of Jesus Christ be like the father. God wants the church to be a community that embodies this reunion and reconciliation.

God's a party guy. The invitation is open. Are we willing to come in and be reconciled with those whom we consider less righteous? God's love is broad enough to include us all. Will we allow reconciliation to top righteousness?

¹ *Contra Costa Times*, March 21, 2007.

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 371-372.

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