

## *What was lost has been revealed!*

*Psalm 32; Luke 15: 1-2, 11b-32*

Last Sunday, Sally spoke about her understanding of what it means to repent. She named that what she had experienced and learned is that to repent is to turn and take a different path. It's in that moment that we realize that the path that we are on is not healthy, and so the better choice would be to go a different direction. To repent is the decision to go another way. To change one's trajectory.

Today's story of the prodigal son is a story in a similar nature: it is a story of *metanoia*. What this word means is a change in one's life resulting from penitence or a spiritual conversion. The moment when we turn back to God. Where we turn in faith to live a life worthy of God's calling.<sup>1</sup> This parable that we heard today is one that gets quite a wide reaction from people. Many sympathize with the older brother, who was steadfast, loyal, and did the right thing. Others empathize with the younger brother. They've been in similar situations where they've made choices that have hurt others that they regret. That change the family dynamics. And there are a few people who identify with the father: the sense of loss and then a sense of joy at the return. Family dynamics are something we can all identify with. Sometimes in the life of our families, there are moments when we get mad at each other. There are times – many times – when we do not see eye-to-eye. There are times when we walk away. There are also times when we stay and we fight. And then there are the times when we reconcile, when we find a sense of harmony, a sense of peace, and that sense of love.

The community of faith, which Robert spoke to before, which is us and is also a family, and which experiences family dynamics as well. We experience moments together when we are frustrated, when we don't see eye-to-eye, when we think the other should be doing this and this person should be doing that. There are also times when we come together in peace and harmony and love. This is the story of truly being lost and found. So what was lost in this story? The younger son's inheritance was lost. He squandered the money; he lived the lavish life. The word prodigal is an adjective which defines, "characterized by profuse and wasteful expenditure". The younger son not only lost the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel G. Deffenbaugh, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 116.

money, he lost his family. Which of course, he realized once he hit rock bottom, as he fed the pigs of another person. This was his moment, when he realized that the path he was on was not the right one. In that moment of true honesty with himself, he realized that to go back home was a better choice, even though he would no longer be worthy to be called a son. He lost his sense of entitlement in that moment. We also know that the father lost his son, and the older brother lost his brother. This story captures a universal human perception that worse than death is the feeling of being lost, especially when the condition has been brought on by one's own lust, greed, or arrogance.

Some of you are aware that I am a huge F-1 Formula racing fan. I love watching cars go fast. I had a moment this week where I feel it's a great example: In Formula One, in order to hold your seat in the car, you had to succeed and do well. There's one particular person named Kevin Magnussen who drives for Haas, and he lost his ride at the end of the 2020 season. Part of it was that his car was not doing very well, but his attitude got worse and worse. He would complain about the people who were working on his car, he would complain about the other drivers – he was miserable. And he lost his drive. This is something that a driver has to expect if they are not performing to the team's expectation. But then this year happened. This year, there was a Russian driver who, because of what's happening in the Ukraine, lost his ride, because Formula One did not want to support the Russians in this war. And what happened? Kevin Magnussen got called back. So he'd been gone for a year and a half, and suddenly was brought on right before we were about to start. And when he was interviewed yesterday, he actually spoke about how he realized that when he was first in Formula One, he had come with an attitude of entitlement. That this was *his* ride; he was entitled to this ride and people should respect him. After losing his ride, and having time to reflect and becoming a father, he's now back with a very different approach. An approach where he appreciates the opportunity and the gift and the experience and the opportunity to try again. You can see it in his driving: he's already way more successful than he was in the past. He had this moment where he realized he was going down a path that was leading him to a place of sadness and misery. Now for some of us, we need that really hard moment to turn us back onto the right path. Regardless, he is now smiling, he is appreciative, and he is grateful for all that he had been given.

The prodigal son, like Magnussen, found himself lost and alone. He lost it all. He was living in a self-imposed prison of shame, betrayal, and mistrust. How many of us have been in this position before, or are still feeling like we are in a self-imposed prison? The prodigal son got to a point where he could no longer live in denial of the truth. He was feeding the pigs when he came to the realization that this was really rock bottom. He realized that even as servant of his father's, he would be treated better than he was now. So he decided in that moment that it was time to go home and ask for forgiveness. He found the courage to face the truth, and to go back and see his father. Confession

became his doorway to freedom, to reconciliation and to a new beginning of a grace-filled life. The son came back expecting the worst, and I have no doubt that on his journey home, he rehearsed his apology and thought of all the responses that his father might bring. He was prepared; he was ready; he had lots of time as he thought. Before he could even get a word out, his father saw him coming a mile away, ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. The prodigal son did manage to say in that moment, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son." His father's response was to ask for a cloak to be put on him, a ring to be put on him, to kill the fatted calf and to have a celebration, for his son had returned. Now, I don't know about you, but that is not what I would have expected if I was coming back thinking that I had been horrible son in the world. I'm sure in that moment that he did not feel worthy of the love and acceptance that he was given. But I also have no doubt that it brought him to tears, and through those tears, healing was found, and it brought him great relief to know that he still had a place in his father's heart and in his father's home. He was still loved.

That's not the end of the story. Then we have the older son. The older son, on the other hand, became frustrated and angry when he heard that his brother had returned and his father was throwing a party. He felt in that moment unappreciated, forgotten, even taken advantage of. How could his father do this to him? What about him? He had stood by his father; he had worked so hard and had done everything right. Why was his father rewarding this younger brother who took advantage and dishonoured the family? And so the older brother left and did not join the party.

Now what's often forgotten in this story or overlooked is that the father then went to the older son. Ran to the older son who was not at the party. His father heard his complaints and responded to the older son by saying, "Son, you are always with me. And all that is mine is yours. I have loved you all along. We had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead in my eyes but now is alive. He was lost and now is found." Now how many of us, as faithful followers, who have served God faithfully, have fallen into the same trap as this older brother? How many of us have found ourselves feeling unappreciated for all the work that we have done, or felt jealous because we perceive that others are being given more or are being treated with special treatment?

We know what was lost in this story, but what was found. For the father, a piece of his heart was found again. A loved one came back. For the prodigal son, he found forgiveness and unconditional love. Acceptance and belonging. For the older son, he too found love. He found appreciation. This story reveals the power of God's love. Jesus told us this parable so that we too can live a grace-filled life. God sees each of us and loves us unconditionally. God rejoices when we repent and turn back to God when we have gone off the path. God is not ashamed of you. God is not judging you or casting

judgements on you. Often we are the ones that are doing that; we cast judgement on ourselves and are often our worst enemies. We have all, at some point, suffered from thought distortions where we assume what other people are thinking, or we label ourselves based on what we think other people see us as.

Spiritual blindness is failing to see the forgiveness that is always there. I think about how many people in my time here have come to the door of this church and said, "I can't come in." And I said, "Why not?" "Because I'm going to be struck by lightning." People truly believe that they are not worthy to be here in this community of faith, but that is not the truth. We are freed and our spiritual sight comes back when we are open and trust in God. When we are open enough to receive the love that God is giving us. To know that God created us exactly the way we were meant to be; that we are unique and special; and we are each a blessing. Living a life worthy of God's calling is not about being perfect. It's not a contest to see who does the most and thus deserves the most and is worthy of a place at the right hand of God. It does cause us to reflect on why we hide our fears. Why we hide behind our insecurities, and why we hide these from the people who love us. Why do we hide from that which makes us feel vulnerable, which leads us to isolation and disconnection? When we are able to see the new possibilities, not afraid to return and repent, we will receive the greatest gift one can receive: that of forgiveness. That of unconditional love. The greatest gift we can give is to forgive another person. So I hope this week that we will find the courage to reach out and to let God in again. To assure one another that God loves us unconditionally. Each one of you is loved for who you are. There's a place for you at God's table.

I go back to the psalm, and the psalmist wrote, "When I kept silence, my body wasted away while I groaned all day long." Don't let your life waste away. Open yourselves to God and be accepted and loved in spite of yourself. May God give us grace.