

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“There Will Always be... a Father’s Love”

(The fourth in a Lenten series on spiritual principles)

Luke 15

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In the beginning, after the forbidden bite, Adam and Eve are hiding. Three chapters into the story, and humanity is hiding from the Creator. They’re ashamed, and they hide, and God goes looking for them.

“Where are you?” God says.

Moses is out in the desert tending his flock... just wandering around out there with the sheep, this leader and prophet. And from a bush that is burning God calls out to Moses. And God talks to Moses and among other things says that he has, **“come down to rescue his people from the hand of the Egyptians.”**

The Lord sends Samuel to anoint innocent boy named David,

And then sends Nathan to a sinful King named David.

Are you seeing a pattern?

Elijah the prophet was running for his life, frightened and depressed... He’s preached his heart out and poured his life out and as far as he can tell, it was all a big waste of time. He’s in a cave... in more ways than one. And I Kings says that **“The Word of the Lord, came to him...”** out there in that barren place and barren state and God said, **“Hey Elijah, what are you doing here?”**

God goes to Elijah.

Hosea, one of those “turn or burn” prophets, marries a wife that has a bit of a sorted past. Let’s just say she wasn’t wearing white at the wedding. And most folks thought it was a bad idea and wouldn’t work... prostitute and pastor, conflicting careers and all... and it didn’t.

When Hosea is off preaching Spring and Fall revivals, she heads back to the red light district. She leaves their home, which was probably the first real loving place she’d ever known, and Gomer goes back to her brokenness. Go figure. I guess brokenness just has too powerful a pull sometimes.

And God decides to make a point to all Israel through Hosea’s dysfunctional family. He tells Hosea to go find her and take her back... and I’ve always loved Frederick Buechner’s telling of it.

When he finally found her, she was lying passed out in a highly specialized establishment located above an adult bookstore, and he had to pay the management plenty to let her out of her contract. She’s lost her front teeth and picked up some scars you had to see to believe, but Hosea had her back again and that seemed to be all that mattered.

(Street preacher that he still was) He changed his sandwich board from (“turn or burn”) to read “God is love” on one side and “There’s no end to it” on the other, and when he stood on the street corner belting out, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! For I am God and not man, The Holy One in your midst. Nobody can say how many converts he made, but one thing that’s for sure is that, including Gomer’s, there was seldom a dry eye in the house. (Peculiar Treasures)

It seems like there’s a pattern here and the pattern seems to be that God comes to us. Humanity is hiding in the trees, humanity’s wandering around, passing time, not being who

we're meant to be... humanity depressed in some dark cave... humanity, the beloved of God caught in the pull of our own brokenness... and God comes to us.

“Where are you?”

What are you doing here?

I'm taking you home.”

God's the one seeking... It's been said a thousand ways. God is the one longing for us...

God is the hunter...

God is the mother to panicked chicks... aching to gather us under her wing.

God is the husband to a harlot... keeps taking her back.

God is the lover, like in the Song of Solomon, who is just outside the chamber knocking on the door. God is like a teenage girl, passionately rerouting her way to algebra just to pass by and maybe bump into the object of her affection.

God is the artist, who paints Texas Red bud after Texas Red bud... to look like a bush on fire... so that maybe we'll pay attention.

There is a pattern... or better yet... a reality that cannot help but flow out of itself to what it loves. A loving flow that is just going to flow. And so in the fullness of time, a child is born, a son is given and it is the Divine saying once again, **“Where are you?”**

And God has to say this because, like Hosea's wife and as the hymn writer said it, we're “prone to wander.” We just seem to get lost.

Luke 15 is all about that... being lost. We didn't read the whole chapter... There's not just one parable, there are three parables. Back-to-back parables about being lost... And it's just so carefully crafted, because Jesus is going to cover all the lost bases because none of us get lost in the same way, do we?

The first parable is about a lost sheep... and sheep get lost in a particular way. They're stupid it seems.

Head down...

Stomach in charge...

Addicted to greener grass.

Sheep nibble their way to lostness. Usually one bite at a time... They aren't thinking... They're controlled by an appetite, and eyes down they eat themselves into a bad place. They look up and realize, they're in big trouble...

And they are, because where there is a sheep, there is sure to be a big bad wolf. It's only a matter of time before a lost sheep is a wolf's lunch.

Anyone here been lost that way? You didn't mean to be. Just so hungry to get up that ladder of success... starving to get that degree... get that promotion. Anyone?

It's not that you said, “I don't want to be in this flock anymore...” But there was some appetite that seemed to have a hold of you.

The appetite to be in control of everything...

The appetite to have everyone approve of you...

The appetite for some pleasure...

And you just maybe spent your way over some hill, nibbling with credit cards into some lost place.

Good thing there is this pattern... because sheep do get lost.

But they do have a good shepherd... And it really doesn't matter how big the flock is. Somehow, this shepherd knows that this particular sheep is missing.

The one whose baaaaaing is sort of high pitched. Who has a spot on her forehead and likes to be petted on her tummy. That one... The Shepherd knows and the shepherd goes.

Some of you have been lost but you didn't nibble your way there. Someone else lost you. Jesus is so careful as he teaches.

In the next parable it's a coin that is lost. And as we all know, a coin doesn't do anything to get lost... a coin is lost... dropped... The force of gravity and the tendency of round things to roll are the culprits.

Someone wasn't paying attention and gravity being gravity, the coin gets lost. He's under some couch... bouncing around in someone's dryer.

Anyone been lost that way? Rarely a day goes by that I don't hear a story about another lost coin. It's the way of things in this world, where there's just too much brokenness. And some folks just can't hang on to their coins, and precious coins get dropped. Or maybe life just sweeps them into some dark corner.

But... there is a God who comes looking... Like a woman who has lost something so precious... maybe a coin given her as a part of a wedding arrangement (which would have been typical). And she turns the house upside down to find what is precious to her, and what is missing... She misses it and she will not stop until it's found.

Some people seem ready to be lost. That's the younger son... it seems anyway. Tired of being where he is... determined not to stay in this home, in this place. It's not untypical.

Some sons seem to need to run away... just get lost. And wise mothers and fathers, of course, painful as it is, are willing to let them go. Sometimes this arrogant path just has to run its course... and it's risky, but that's just the way it is... so, rebellious sons head off for far countries, thinking along the way, as they're led along by their arrogance.

“Free at last, free at last...”

And like all “illusory freedom” the younger son's venture into the far country takes him into bondage... and he's not singing “free at last anymore.”

Lots of us have gotten lost that way. But we don't have to stay there.

The story says, **“When he came to himself.”** What a great line. **“When he came to himself,”** he said there, (a Jewish boy feeding the pigs... how low can you go?) He said, **“Well, this is gross. This is just stupid, I'm headed home to my father.”** So... the lost boy, our text says, **“Got up and went towards his father.”**

And here's the real important line of the story... **“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and ran to him.”**

He's on the porch...

Binoculars in hand...

Searching the horizon...

For the son that was lost.

Had to let him go... but never stopped waiting and looking and when he spotted some dot and recognized that walk that was his boy's walk, the way a parent can do. **“While he was still a long way off... he ran to him.”** There's a pattern... There will always be a father's love.

There's one more lost parable... There are four stories and the last maybe the most important to Jesus. Because all this story telling was done in response to some mumbling and grumbling by the Pharisees.

Not all of them were that way... but some of them seem to be stuck in mumble mode... they're lost in it.

“Jesus is eating with sinners again...” **“Yeah, I noticed he was joking around with a tax collector yesterday.”** **“I saw that too... and last night he and his disciples threw a birthday party for one of the girls from 6th Street.”** **“You know it'd be one thing if after he got them there for the party, he would read from the Torah about not committing adultery... but not just to be with them...”** Mumble, mumble, mumble... grumble, grumble, grumble...

Do you hear it? Do you join in?

Lots of things cause it. Feelings of insignificance... fear... The thought that if we don't hold things together the whole world will fall to pieces. The need to protect... defend. Sometimes it's just sin... jealousy, bitterness. It's life lived with a very limited capacity to see, ourselves... and one another.

These people are lost... and that's why Jesus tells the fourth parable. The older brother is mumbling in the field. And you can just hear his self talk...

It's all about what's not fair and what's not just. And the more he mumbles to himself, the more lost he gets.

My father's indulgence is making a mockery of everything decent. How will anyone care about the Torah if he, as a leader, behaves this way? The ol' man's lost it... he doesn't know what's best for the farm. I better take over.

People who are lost this way start lying to themselves. He's lying to himself...

"All these years, I've been slaving away." No, you haven't, you're a son... sons don't work as slaves, they do their part as sons.

"He never gave me a goat." Wrong again... in verse 11 the Father had divided his property between them. He'd gotten his whole inheritance early.

"And now he's squandered dad's money on prostitutes." Really, what makes you so sure his wild living was sexual. The story says nothing about sex... We tend to condemn loudest in others what we've not been able to see in ourselves.

The elder brother is lost... and lost in the worst way because it's real hard to know that you're lost when all appearances indicate that you're right there in the middle of things.

But he's so lost... they're partying back at the Ponderosa and he cannot find his way back there... There's dancing going on... a great perichoresis is the word they used in Greek... and the word folks landed on, by the way, to describe the Trinity. It's the big dance... and he's not there.

But... there's a pattern... a flow that flows from the flow. And just like in the other three stories... God goes out... Notice, **"So his father went out and pleaded with him."** There will always be a father's love.

The constant is... God is never going to give up on you. God is going to find you... and find you... and find you again.

Run to you... in your repentance.

Plead with you... in your grumpy mumbling.

How can He give you up...

He is God, the Holy one in our midst... and this is what holiness does.

If we're lost... there is very good news... God knows and God is pursuing us. And when we're found... there's great joy. There's always a party at the end of these parables. Did you see that? That's the way the story is going to end... That's the way your story is going to end... In the joy of God. In the Dance.

Amen.

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