

## “The Prodigal That Stayed Home” –Luke 15:25-32

Every one of us in this room loves a story or a television show or a movie that has a happy ending. For this reason I love Disney movies and I love John Wayne movies because all of them have happy endings. I loved the “Waltons” because they usually had a happy ending. We love it when justice and goodness prevails and the good guys win.

In our story today Jesus tells his audience about lost things because he was grumbled at for hanging out with and eating with tax collectors and sinners. So Jesus told them a parable with three parts in it with the common theme of lost things and lost people being found. In every one of them there is a happy ending. The shepherd finds his lost sheep. The housewife finds her lost coin, and the father finds his lost son. In every case there is a happy ending and a celebration. Jesus uses these three stories to emphasize something very important: Don't hate what is lost rather, rejoice in its being found. He was referring to things, but more importantly he was thinking about lost people who have wandered away from God and then come back. But wait a minute. In the story of the prodigal son it seems we stop there. It seems that once the prodigal son comes home and the party starts we close the book and sigh and say “I'm glad it all worked out.” But the story isn't over yet.

There is one more matter and that is what to do about the older brother. We pick up the story at the time of the party for the younger brother. About the time the party is in full swing, the fatted calf has been cooked, the robe and the ring on, happiness and laughter flowing freely, the older brother comes in from the field. He had been working hard and late. He hears the unfamiliar sounds of party- going and asks what was going on. He learns that the reason for the party is that his no-good brother had returned home and his father was having a celebration.

The older brother refuses to go into the house to the party. His father comes out and pleads with him to join in. The older brother refuses saying that he had been a loyal son. He had worked hard all of these years. You have never had a party for me. The father tells he had always been with him and everything that

was the father's was his. But it is time to celebrate for his brother was dead and he is alive again. Sadly, this is where the story ends. We never know what the older brother did. Jesus leaves everyone hanging. Jesus leaves the conclusion to be worked out by the listeners.

We love the story of the lost sheep, lost coin, and the prodigal because they turn out happy. However we miss the point Jesus wanted the most to make. What happens to the older brother? I think it is a wonderful question because most of us probably find ourselves sometimes thinking and even acting like the older brother.

How does Jesus see the older brother? The older brother represents the "good" people who stand at the edge of the crowd. Perhaps the older brother represents those who are critical of what is going on around them. Perhaps the older brother represents those people who live very responsible lives, obey the laws, are generally moral, and work hard. The older brother represents those who do community projects, serve on in the PTA, service clubs, and serve on church committees. Most of us at one time or another sympathize with the older brother. We understand him. I bet even some of us don't blame him for being angry. He had a good reason to complain.

The father loves the older brother just as much as he loved the son that strayed. The father wants the older brother to share in the joy that the family is once again back together. To all appearances, the older brother was a moral man, industrious, and thrifty. But in his heart it might have been a far different matter.

The older brother never really discovered the joys of home. He didn't realize all of the goodness he had. He especially didn't appreciate the daily blessings of a loving father. How sad it was to hear the son say to his father, "What have you ever given me?" Those listening to Jesus knew what blessings he had. As the older son, he would receive 2/3 of the family property. He had the privilege of working with his father in a very successful prestigious family business. He had a father who loved him deeply and generously.

What does Jesus want his listeners and us to take away from this story? Jesus wants people to enjoy their faith. They had been religious all of their lives. They had lived the rules of faith as faithfully as possible. They said and observed all of the right things, but there was really no joy and fulfillment in their faith. The younger brother wasted himself in riotous living, the older brother wasted his life in mean, selfish, and small living. His life turned out to be as harmful and tragically as his younger brother.

The older brother did not know his father. He grew up around his father, working with his father and yet did not know the nature of who his father was. He did not know the abundant love of the father for both of his sons. He could not understand why his father so readily forgave "his son". He didn't acknowledge he had a brother anymore because he did not know the father's heart. The father reaches out to him because he realizes that both sons are lost. He has gotten the younger one back, but he also wants his older son back also.

As I have mentioned all through our series, that Jesus is teaching us about the nature of who God is and how we are to respond to God. Behind this parable lies a profound and overwhelming truth about God and God's kingdom. We humans, we were all lost, mired in sins of greed, indifference, and resentment. Before we knew it God raised us up and called us home. It is not just about you or me, or my sin or your sin, or my desert, or your desert. It's about God and God's active, stretching, healing love that finds each one of us and calls us back home.

The hero in this story is not the son who left and came home, nor the son who never went anywhere, but the hero is the waiting father. The father who waited at the door every day until the prodigal came home and he waited for the older son to recognize that the father's love had never left his side. The father is God who is determined, compassionate, and infinite in love. It is God who waits for us every day with open arms to give us a great embrace, and deep expansive love.

What does Jesus teach us about how we are to act? We are not to be like the younger son or the older son. We are to act like the father. We are to become like the father. We want to not only receive forgiveness but to also forgive; not just

the one who is welcomed home, but to welcome others home, not just the one who receives compassion, but one who gives compassion for others. We want to receive God's generous blessings but to also be generous to others in our love, attention, and material needs. All that is the father's is ours also. We share this with others. Being in the father's house requires that we make the father's life our own. The father keeps nothing for himself but showers it on the sons. He moves away from fear of withholding to the love of giving. We are to be like this father.

In the end the parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God, deeper, wider, and higher than anything we can ever imagine. Are you living in the father's house, joyful, knowing that you are deeply loved and accepted by this father.