

How Can the Lost Be Found and the Dead Made Alive?

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at Christchurcheastbay.org. Good morning.

My name is August Fern and I am one of your deacons. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, verses 1 and 2, and verses 11 to 32 as printed in your liturgy.

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees and the teacher of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Jesus continued. There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate.

[1 : 07] So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to the fields to feed pigs.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death.

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

[2 : 14] The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger and sandal on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For the son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

[3 : 16] But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with the prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him? My son, the father said, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ. So there was a man who had two sons. It's an amazing opening line. And we know when we hear it, we know instinctively that Jesus is a master storyteller because in our own experience, like families are complicated.

Amen? Amen? Families are sometimes dysfunctional. You know, we know how it can go between fathers and mothers and sons and daughters.

We don't always see eye to eye. We don't always get along. We don't always live happily ever after. And many of us know that personally. We know it painfully. We also know it biblically and theologically.

[4 : 29] When you open up the Bible to the very first story, Adam had two sons, right? Cain and Abel and how did that go? It ended in a bloody mess, you know?

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob had 12 sons, but of those 12 sons, he loved two of them more than all the rest.

And so we don't really have to get much further beyond the first book of the Bible to know that when a story begins where the father had two sons, it's going to be, I don't know, complicated.

It's like starting a story with, it was a dark and stormy night, right? And to whom is Jesus telling this amazing story? He says in verse 1, Jesus goes and he associates with the out group.

And that means that the spiritually serious and the morally upright are outraged. And they're saying, And why, Jesus, do you welcome like family around your table these people that don't deserve to be there?

[5 : 41] And Jesus is being severely criticized. And he responds to that criticism with something we also all know about, which is we probably all lost something that we deeply value.

Anybody ever lost your phone? Or lost your wallet? Have any of you ever lost your child? Okay, you can ask Catherine about how I lost one of our children at coffee hour.

But Jesus launches into a story about a shepherd who lost a precious sheep and a woman who lost her treasured coin. And then he gets to this story, this father lost his two beloved sons.

And I want to look at this under a few headings. I want to look at the costly grace for the self-defeated. I want to look at pleading grace for the self-righteous. And I want to look at reconciling grace for the family of God.

Costly grace for the self-defeated. Pleading grace for the self-righteous. And reconciling grace for the family of God. Now, we had a staff retreat on Thursday, an elder retreat on Saturday.

[6 : 44] And I had two Duke games this weekend. So, we'll see about that third point. I don't know if we'll have time for that. But, costly grace for the self-defeated.

Let's just go through the story. It says in verse 12, the son says to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. Which is the equivalent of saying, drop dead, Dad.

Father, I can't wait for you to die. In fact, I don't want you. I want your money. It's an act of deep disrespect. And any respectable father in the ancient Near East would have disowned his son on the spot.

He would have just driven his son out of the family. But this father is a gracious father. And he gives his son what his son wants. Surprisingly, he says to his son, Your will be done.

Right? And it lets him go. And it says that he divided his property between his two sons. Literally, it says he divided his bios. He divided his life.

[7 : 46] He tore his life apart. And it costs the cost of land, the cost of his place, the cost of his honor and his standing. The father bears the agony of, and the shame of, his son's rejected love.

Verse 13, Not long after that, the younger son got together. All he had, he set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth and wild living. In other words, he liquidated everything into cash.

And he went and tried to have it all. He tried to have a life without limits. And in doing so, he wasted his life. All of his gifts, all of his potential, he just burned it to an absolute crisp.

And it doesn't take very long for him to hit rock bottom. And Jesus says in verse 14, After he'd spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

[8 : 51] How do you like Jesus' analysis of our human condition? All of us have made this same bid for independence from God, this bid to be autonomous from God.

We had no appreciation for the love in God's heart of the security we had in his home. And instead, we demanded to be free, to live on our own as we want to live.

And Jesus says that self-will that's in all of us can often degenerate into self-indulgence and we end up, in various ways, squandering our lives. And if you're a Jew, the absolute worst thing that can happen to you is that you become a slave.

And that you become a slave of a Gentile. And that you become the slave of a Gentile pig farmer. This Jewish son smells like pigs and he's starving for pig slop.

Jesus says he's bankrupt, he's hungry, he's alone, he's at the absolute depths of misery. And two times in the story, we hear this father describe his son in verse 24 and in verse 32.

[10:03] The father describes his son as dead and lost. The apostle Paul says that all of us, we're dead in our trespasses and in our sins.

That we've all wandered away from God, we have flouted his authority, we've rejected his and rebuffed his love, we've wasted his gifts. We've alienated ourselves from God and we've also alienated ourselves from our true selves.

We're exiled even within ourselves. We have no hope because we have no God anymore. But Jesus says he came to his senses.

He came to his senses and what wakes him up is this memory of his father. That his father is actually a wealthy father and he's not only a wealthy father but he's a generous father.

It says in verse 17, when he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare and here I am starving to death. Everyone you meet carries within their heart some memory of the father, some memory of their true home.

[11:17] And everybody we meet is, their heart is desperately restless until they come and find their rest in the home of the father. And verse 18 says this, he says, I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you.

I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. And at first that sounds like good news but the closer you look at that, it's actually a self-serving, self-salvation project because he doesn't actually care that he's broken his father's heart.

He just wants to eat better. He just wants his misery to end. He just wants to get his life back on track. And he thinks that my biggest problem is that I lost all the money.

And if I hadn't lost the money, I would have never sinned. And so I'm going to solve my own problem with my own effort by getting some job training and hiring myself out as a servant and recovering the money and earning that lost inheritance and I will save myself.

The problem isn't the money, is it? The problem is that he's dishonored his father. The problem is he's become estranged from his father.

[12:31] The problem is that he's made himself into a hostile enemy of the father. And despite the fact that he deserves to be cut off from his family, despite the fact that he's trying to save himself, the father sees his loss as so great and so valuable that he cannot contemplate the permanence of that loss.

He cannot acquiesce to the loss. And so we hear in verse 20 that he got up and he went to his father, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

And he ran to his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him. See, day after day, this father had gone out and he had scanned the horizon for his lost son.

Right? He's longing for his son. He's patiently and vigilantly looking for a sign of his son's return.

And as soon as he sees his son as a speck on the horizon, what does this father do?

It's a beautiful picture of free but costly grace because the whole village knows the shame of this son. Right? The whole village is expecting this pillar of the community to stay put on the front porch and have the son come groveling back up to the house.

[13:49] Right? Or if this father moves at all, for him to kind of slowly in a dignified way move out to go and punish his son in the eyes of everybody.

But this father shows compassion by doing what? Running. We call this the parable of the prodigal son, but really we should call it the parable of the running father.

The kissing father because he takes his, the bottom of his robe and his hands and he does what traditional Middle Eastern men would absolutely never do in public and he starts running to reach his son before his son can reach the village.

And by racing down that road in an undignified manner, by making an absolute fool of himself, this father is taking all the shame and all the humiliation that would otherwise be heaped upon his son. He's having it heaped upon himself. And he knows that this visible demonstration of costly grace, of sacrificial reconciliation with his son in public will silence all those voices in the village that are ready to heap criticism and contempt upon his boy.

[15:03] And when he runs to his son, he throws his arms around him and he showers him with kisses before he can even begin that well-rehearsed self-salvation speech.

The scriptures actually say that he kissed him much. He kissed him eagerly. He kissed him often. He kissed him affectionately. And just as the son had totally rejected his father, the father now totally accepts, totally forgives, totally restores his son.

You see, these spiritually serious and morally upright people are complaining about Jesus and they're criticizing Jesus for welcoming and eating with sinners as if they're his family.

And so Jesus tells this story about a father who takes the form of a servant. This father who comes out of the house and down from the house.

This father who runs outside of the village in abject humiliation and he takes all of the shame on himself to seek and to save and to reconcile the lost.

[16:11] And what is Jesus describing? He's illustrating what the father has sent him to do. Right? Because elsewhere in the gospel of John in John 14, Jesus says, anyone who has seen me has seen the father.

Jesus is saying, I've come acting in my father's stead. I've come as my father's representative. I've come so that you can see that in and through me the father's costly grace is being demonstrated. And Jesus didn't just run outside the village. Jesus came all the way from heaven to earth. He not only emptied himself of his heavenly glory but when he went to his cross, Jesus was treated as an absolute outcast.

Suffering the infinite cost of his own life so that we could be brought into God's family by grace. By free but costly grace.

All of that inheritance that we squandered, all of that potential that we wasted, Jesus came to pay that unpayable debt on the cross and in our place.

[17:19] And there he cried out, my God, my God, why? Why have you forsaken me? And you see, Jesus took that forsakenness upon himself so that we could have the hug and the kisses of the father.

Verse 21 says this, the son said to him, father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. And you see, Jesus was stripped of all of his dignity.

Jesus was covered with the filth of all of our sin and our shame so that we could be clothed with that robe of his beautiful and perfect righteousness, a dignity and a status and a standing that we absolutely do not deserve.

See, Jesus had his hands and his feet nailed to that cross of shame so that we could receive that signet ring of the father that says we're his sons and we're his daughters so that we could have those feet that are barefoot like slaves so that our feet could have sandals put on them and we could know that we belong in the father's house.

[18:44] That we have the father's power. We have the father's authority. We have the father's acceptance in his love. You see, Jesus went and he drank that cup of God's eternal justice so that we could drink the cup of the father's joy so that we could feast at the father's banqueting table.

And friends, there's no other way to come back home. There's no other way for the father to bring us in. Jesus had to go and he had to experience the darkness.

He had to come into that uttermost place of despair and spiritual alienation in our place. He had to take the full curse of our human rebellion.

He had to experience our cosmic homelessness and alienation so that we could enter back into the village where we belong under the protective care of the father's acceptance so we could be welcomed back into our true home.

And when you, when you, are you moved by that? When you see what it costs for the father to do this for you, when you see what it costs for Jesus to come and to bring us back into the father's

house, to bring us back into our true home where we can finally fully be at rest, does that move your heart?

[20 : 14] Can you believe, can you even half believe today that the hug of the father is for you? That his kisses are often and they are affectionate and they are for you?

Jesus is telling us about costly grace for the self-defeated, people who've wasted their gifts, people who've squandered their potential, that they too, even them, can have a fresh start and a new beginning.

But he's not just telling us about the costly grace for the self-defeated, he's talking about pleading grace for the self-righteous, pleading grace for the self-righteous. He says in verse 23, bring the fattened calf and kill it, let's have a feast and celebrate, for the son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found, so they began to celebrate.

You see this father, he's so overjoyed, he's so overjoyed when just one person, one sinner repents. The son who had been spiritually dead has been raised to life.

The son who'd been morally lost, he's been found and he says, so let's spare no expense to celebrate. The best meat, we're gonna barbecue, we're gonna invite all the village to come and we're gonna have a feast with music and dancing and glad rejoicing because the father is so happy that his son is home safe and sound.

[21 : 49] Now many people stop right there and they call this the parable of the prodigal son but how many sons does his father have? He has two sons and we haven't even gotten to his main point yet because Jesus is telling the story for the spiritually serious and the morally upright, these older brothers and sisters who see the father's costly grace, they see his uncalculating generosity toward these undeserving younger brothers and younger sisters and instead of rejoicing, they're muttering and instead of joy, they feel anger and Jesus is saying that these brothers represent two different kinds of people, two different kind of ways to live, right?

Two paths of finding happiness and worth, two different ways of addressing what's wrong with the world, two different ways of defining what's right and what's wrong and the younger brother represents that rebel spirit, that free spirit, right?

His is the way of self-discovery. He says the world would be a better place if tradition and authority and all the barriers to personal freedom were just removed, right?

And he says, I'm gonna be the only one who decides what's right and what's wrong for me and I'm gonna go find true, my true self, I'm gonna go find happiness by living the way I wanna live and that's one way.

But the other way is the way of the older brother, he's responsible, he's honorable, his is the way of moral conformity. He says the world would be a better place if all of us had more self-control, if all of us had more discipline, if we all just put other people ahead of our own individual fulfillment and self-expression.

[23 : 41] He says, I'm not gonna do what I wanna do, he says, I'm gonna do what God wants me to do, what my parents want me to do, what other people want me to do and Jesus' question when we look at these two brothers is to say, which way is more self-centered and which way is more self-destructive?

Because the reality is both of these sons are alienated from their father. Both of these sons shockingly are spiritually dead and morally lost.

Both of them need the father to go out and invite them into the feast. And the younger son comes into the feast but the older son does not.

On the outside, that older son, he seems all put together, he seems like there's nothing wrong with him but on the inside, Jesus says, he's actually full of sin.

And Jesus says, do you see that older son in yourself? Does Jesus' description of his heart resonate with what lies beneath the surface of your own heart?

[24 : 52] Listen to what verse 28 says, the older brother became angry and he refused to go in. You see, there's a fire of self-righteous anger that's burning on the inside against his brother's unforgivable irresponsibility and against the father's uncalculating grace and generosity.

And this older son, he actually feels not just superior to his younger brother, he feels superior to his father. He's openly insulting his father, he's refusing to join in the father's feast and we can see like his relationship with the father, he seems fine but his relationship is broken.

He's run just as far away from his younger brother even though he's right there at home. It's just so much more subtle, it's more inward, it's more hidden and therefore it's more dangerous.

The older brother became angry, it says in verse 28, he refused to go in so his father went out and pleaded with him but he answered his father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you and I've never disobeyed your orders.

His resentment and his bitterness indicate that he sees himself less as a beloved son and more as a beholden slave. He says, I've never disobeyed you, I've worked hard to live up to your standards, I've been a good person so now you owe me and you gotta do things in my life the way I want you to do them.

[26 : 26] I've lived a good life so you should be giving me a good life. Any of you ever judge God like that? Verse 29, he says, look, all these years I've been slaving for you, I've never disobeyed your orders and yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when the son of yours who squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. You see, he's using his moral life thinking that it gives him leverage and control over the father.

he says, you know what, I've actually earned the right to tell you how to run the household and to instruct you on how all the stuff in your estate ought to be deployed.

And here he is with this incredible opportunity to delight the father, to celebrate his brother by going into the feast and yet in just absolute resentment and refusal we can see that on the inside he really has a hard and a cold heart.

And the goal of his obedience all along it hasn't been love, it's been control. This older son wants the same thing that the younger son wants, he just wants it in a different way.

[27 : 48] The younger son he's chafed at partaking of the family's assets under the father's supervision and so he wants to just make his own decisions. He wants to be free, he wants to be unfettered and so he defiantly declares his independence from the father.

But you know this older son is just as resentful because he too wants the father's goods rather than the father himself. Neither son loved the father for himself.

Both of these sons are using the father for self-centered ends rather than loving the father for his own sake, rather than delighting in the father and enjoying the father and serving the father just simply for who he is.

Are you not shocked by this message of Jesus because he says you can become alienated from God by breaking all the rules or you can become just as alienated from God by keeping all the rules carefully and diligently.

And Jesus says do you see and do you hear this older brother in your heart? He's never left home but he has this slavish obedience that's driven him just as far away from his father as his younger brother ever was in that pagan pigsty.

[29 : 10] And how does the father respond to the hard and resistant heart of his older son? Well he says it says in verse 28 or verse 31 it says my son the father said you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

The father goes out and he's pleading with his son you know if it had been me I would have said hey why don't you stay outside and we'll just have this party without you. You know if it were up to all the villagers they would have said you should disown this rebellious son right here on the spot. But this father who's been painfully humiliated earlier in the day by running to his younger son he does the same for his older lost son. For the second time in one day he goes out in a costly demonstration of unexpected grace and he goes not to scold he goes not to rebuke as we might expect this is a kissing father.

It says he goes out in verse 28 to plead with his son and he says my son you are always with me and everything I have is yours. This father is so good he tenderly bypasses all the bitterness all the arrogance all the insults all the distortion of facts all the unjust accusations the attacks on his character the rejection of his love and this father is just graciously pleading with his son who thinks he's a slave and this father of all grace he says I just want you to know two things number one you're always with me and I'm always with you and you can count on me I'm totally trustworthy and I'm absolutely reliable and I'm completely a faithful father to you and secondly not only are you always with me but everything

I have is yours because of your relationship with me you have a massive inheritance you have an abundance of riches don't you realize that I've graciously already given you all things how much

more could I possibly give you don't you know all the privileges that you're already living in you see the father hopes that he'll soften this hard heart and he'll liberate this slavish heart and he'll deliver this self-righteous heart that's become more about performance and more about outward appearance and more about control than it really is about relationship than it really is about the loving bonds of affection friends do you hear the father's pleading grace for you it's this invitation that's for us to say father in my self-righteousness!

[32 : 11] I too have sinned against heaven against you and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son in this first son we see costly grace for the self-defeated in the second son we see pleading grace for the self-righteous but I want to say just a final word as we come to this family meal together this family feast of joy because I think there's a word here about reconciling grace for the family of God and again the more time I have on a sermon the shorter it is so I'm sorry Duke's going to the final four and I just haven't had the time the past few days but listen to what the father says here at the end and think about its implications for what we're to be as a family the family of God he says my son the father said you are always with me and everything

I have is yours but he says we not just I but we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours not just this son of mine but this brother of yours was dead and is alive again he was lost and he's found we don't really know how the story ends right Jesus again curtain falls cliffhanger open ending is this son coming inside or not is he going to stay a slave or is he going to become free is he going to live in self-righteous resentment and bitterness or is he going to have the father's joy but it closes he's still dead and he's still lost and the implication of this open ending for us as the family of God is Jesus is calling us to have God's own beating heart for sinners he wants the heart of God to be our heart and so the question as we come to this table and we commit ourselves and renew our relationship with this amazing gracious good generous and glorious father the question for us is if God the father is daily scanning the horizon he's daily seeking for the lost to be found and the dead to be made alive and for people that are far off in a far country coming back to their true home how can we as sons of the father and daughters of the father not also be seeking those same people that the father is seeking and if

God himself is running down the road for alienated sinners with undeserved costly grace to welcome them warmly into his feast the question is how could we do anything less and if God is embracing all the strangers around you if you look around you there's probably a few people that you just don't even know absolute strangers if God is embracing all the strangers who are sitting around you with compassion and calling them his sons and his daughters how can we not embrace them as well and reach out to them and begin to build relationships with them to say well you're a son of the father so you're my brother and you're a daughter of the father so you're my sister you know if God has declared someone in his family forgiven who are we to not also forgive them if God if God looks at the person that's sitting next to you today or the person sitting next to you later this week in your community group and he he's declared that person is no longer lost but they're found they're no longer dead but they're alive and if he's rejoicing over that person then who are we to have a cold and a hard heart toward them who are we to be lacking in joy who are we to refuse the father's joy that he has for that other person you see if God has accepted people who are coming to this table with his most precious gifts if God has spared no expense to restore them from absolute shame to the highest place of honor if God has given them his robe and his ring and his sandals and his fattened calf then how can we not also accept and honor those whom God has accepted and honored at great cost to himself

Paul says the apostle Paul in Romans 12 he says be devoted to one another and honor one another above yourselves another translation says love one another with mutual affection and outdo one another in showing honor you see the father's not only seeking to reconcile his sons to himself but what he wants to do is reconcile his sinful kids with each other and the question of this parable is will this family of the father be reunited in love?

Will this family of the father live together in unity and joy and peace? Will we as the people of God learn how to live happily ever after given all that God has done to make that possible?

[38 : 05] So I want you to think about that as we come to this table in the name of the father son and holy spirit amen