March 6, 2016
Fourth Sunday in Lent

The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and not one, but two lost sons are the entire substance of the 15th chapter of Luke’s Gospel. In what one brother priest calls “The lost and found column of the New Testament,” we come to the very heart of the Gospel, the primary theme of our Lord’s ministry, and the crown jewel of all the parables uttered by Jesus. At its’ core, the Gospel is the story of God refusing to abandon God’s human creation to our lost-ness. Our Lord’s ministry illustrates this in the turning of every page in every Gospel. Whether it is “sinners” whom Jesus “welcomes” and with whom he “eats” or the self-righteously Jesus invites to follow, at every turn, he tells the lost they are found… if only they will believe it.

The parable of the prodigal son – and as I said a minute ago – perhaps the parable of two prodigal sons is the Hope diamond of all our Lord’s parables. We all know the story, its plot, characters, and profound images.

- The younger of two sons asks his wealthy father for his inheritance
- The father divests himself of his fortune, giving the younger son a third, and the older son two thirds of all he had – land, assets, everything.
- The younger son goes “to a far country” and there wastes all the wealth his father gave him.
- Hungry and destitute, this boy finds pitiful employment feeding pigs where, in a moment of self-awareness, he decides to reconfigure his ego, return home, and repent before his father asking that he be made a hired hand.
- As he nears home, the father sees him, runs to him, throws his arms around him and welcomes him back, calling for a robe for his dirty body, a ring for his calloused finger, and a party unlike any other ever thrown in that part of the world.
- Meanwhile, the older brother, the man who now owns the farm given him by his father, hears the noise of joyful celebration coming from the house and refuses to participate.
- The father goes out to the field, confronts the older son, and is rebuked. To which the father says, “Son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found.’

That’s the story we remember, the story we will never tire or grow weary of hearing, and the story that asks a question I cannot get out of my mind.

Why is it we, given the choice when faced with any deficit or loss of any kind – be it to death, employment, fire, theft, love, relationship, trust, you name it – narrow our focus and pain on what we have lost? Put another way, what more do we lose, how more brutal is life, when we pitch our tent in the land of the lost rather than finding a way to live in the land of the found? And, to be candid, do we have a choice?

Let’s look at the parable for some answers. Read and re-read the parable again. Read it out loud as you listen to your own voice intone every syllable, word, phrase, twist in the plot, images of estate and wealth, waste and weariness, confession and restoration, celebration and
anger and tell me how much space is taken up on what is lost in the story? Read it from front to 
back, back to front and you will discover only meager words and moments when what is lost 
stares you in the face. And when it does, “lost” quickly transposes itself to “found”.

For example, the father’s giving of the inheritance to the younger son is noted when we 
read “he divided his property between them.” When that sentence ends, there is no mention of a 
father’s grief, pain, anger, helplessness (and all of those feelings surely dropped into his life with 
brutal suddenness)… we hear nothing of those emotions.

Look at the boy in the far country throwing away his money and his dignity. He loses 
everything, but even in his prepared speech, when he admits his wrong, begging his father to 
make him a servant, a strange thing happens. When the boy finds himself reunited with his 
father, feeling his dad’s arms wrapped around him, confessing his wrong, the father refuses to 
hear the “hired hand” request. In fact, the father interrupts the boy’s speech calling for the robe, 
the ring, and the killing of the calf for the party. The father embodies “found-ness” not “lost-
ness”.

Can’t you see 

the father walk out of the house… vibrating with celebration and into the 
field where the older son continues to work. Angry at his father and bitter over his younger 
brother’s behavior, over-hear the father’s plea to this son to join the community of the found. 
This boy-now-a-man will hear none of it! His sole focus burns with hatred, fueled by loss and 
envy rather than joy awakened by his lost brother found.

What is God saying to us from this timeless story… one that never grows old? As we 
gaze at this Hope diamond of a parable, what do we see? And might we see some of ourselves in 
its light, showing us a better way to follow the One who goes before us to suffer and die? At the 
very least, the story confronts us with the reality of loss. To live any length of years is know that 
life and loss cannot exist without each other. The grim reality of death alone is the greatest loss 
we experience. Working through grief is no easy assignment and yet all of us must take up that 
work from time to time.

Loss shows up in relationships, careers, hobbies, friends, and things misplaced or taken 
from us. The story tells us there is no escaping loss. When loss moves in, can we face the loss, 
name it, feel its grief, and, in time, move to a place of gratitude for all we have found? Do not 
hear me suggest some Pollyanna, “get over it” approach to the losses that show up in our lives. 
Not at all!

What I am suggesting, and what I believe this hopeful parable is saying is something 
else. What if we could shift our focus from seeing loss as a menacing presence that moves into 
our lives and refuses to leave, to accepting loss as an unwelcome visitor who shows up from time 
to time for a season and eventually leaves? Put another way, what grace might God release in 
our lives if we would refuse to see the glass of our life half-empty with loss and embrace life, 
half-full brimming with being found?

Life and loss are inseparable. Loss, with all its brutal pain, may have walked in on you in 
recent days, unexpected and rude. Or some loss that wounded your soul years ago still stalks
your heart and poisons your spirit. Hear the good news today. God knows all our losses and, like the father, grieves with us when loss robs us of life’s best. God also invites us to a party attended by folks just like us who have known life’s many losses. **There, in God’s presence,** we discover we are **found and loved, wanted and valued.** There, we remember again that life triumphs over death and being found is God’s gift to the lost.