

LOST AND FOUND

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

[Lent 1, 13 March 2025, Augsburg University Chapel]

Dorothy was a life-long and beloved member of the small Lutheran church I served in Attica, Indiana, and I will never forget her words at a Sunday morning adult forum session when we were working our way through Luther's *Small Catechism*. We were discussing Luther's commentary on the Lord's Prayer and the petition for the day was "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It's a pretty straightforward part of our faith, we all might agree. In fact, Luther's commentary on the petition is clear – "What does this mean? We ask in this prayer that our Father in heaven would not hold our sins against us...and we pray that he would give us everything by grace, for we sin every day and deserve nothing but punishment..." (But here is the kicker) – "So we on our part will heartily forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us." Not much wiggle room there, and Dorothy acknowledged as much when she said, "I get this – *in theory* – I know I that my sins have been forgiven, but you just don't know what bad things people have done to me. I know what the words say and I see what Luther tells us they mean, but let's get real, there are times when you just can't, you just don't want to, forgive." And so there are.

Gregory Jones, the former dean of the divinity school at Duke University, tells the story of a 16th century church member in Switzerland, who, church records tell us, refused to say the Lord's Prayer, because he didn't want to utter the words: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." As if refusing to say the words would excuse him for the fact that he just couldn't forgive those who had hurt him.

Now, both Dorothy and our 16th century church member may have had good, rational explanations of their conclusions—in fact, I know something of Dorothy's story, the hurt and pain she felt because of how family members treated her after her husband's death some ten years earlier...how we do resolve such conflicts between the theory and practice of our faith? How do we learn to forgive?

For some of us—including Dorothy—we might agree with essayist, Anne Lamott, who writes, "I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind." Funny – yes – but perhaps more true of many of us than we would like to admit.

And then we are confronted with this familiar and powerful gospel from Luke – the story of the Prodigal Son – addressed to the tax collectors and Pharisees, along with stories about a lost coin and lost sheep – and we must grapple with what God intends for God's faithful people, we must come to grips with this remarkable parable of reconciliation and forgiveness, we must contend with the claim upon us that we were lost and now have been found, and that this claim

changes everything for our lives of faith in the world. It is hard to forgive, but we are called to forgive – as we are forgiven.

I love this story for the ways in which it depicts the arc of God's reconciling work in our lives and in the world. We can find ourselves in this story. Perhaps you are like the headstrong son who demands his birthright and sets off on his own, only to fall on hard times and lose all with which he has been entrusted. Or perhaps you are like the good and faithful son who stays behind, who also receives his birthright and does what is expected of him, and then with seemingly good reason complains that his wayward brother, who has wronged the father and the family, is being inappropriately welcomed home. As some commentators have noted, there are ways in which both sons are lost, following their disparate paths and not fully grasping what their father intended or how he behaved. Surely there is some of both sons in each of us and in our world. And that is why the parent in this story is the pivotal figure in understanding God's love and grace and truth.

It begins with dividing the family property between the children. Like the father in the parable, God offers all of us our birthright, the free will to pursue our lives as we would choose, the riches of God's wondrous creation as our very own. God generously sends God's children off on their own paths in the world. And God watches closely as we make our ways, sometimes grieving with us in the circumstances of bad decisions and situations out of control; sometimes accompanying those who stay close to home, doing what is expected. But, we're told in the parable, there is perhaps no greater joy for God than the return of those who have fallen away, who have been lost, who recognize their sin and unworthiness, and now have been found again. For those who have been dead and have come again to life, there is for our God the joyous occasion for feasting and dancing and celebrating. Lost and now found. Dead and now alive. This is what God hopes for in all of God's creation – that we would return so that all of the creation might rejoice. It is a remarkable vision that the apostle Paul proclaims, "Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

In powerful ways, this parable also helps us reflect on our Lenten journey. Marked as human on Ash Wednesday, we are sent forth to live as God's faithful people in the world – simultaneously sinful and saved, as Luther puts it in stating one of the central concepts in Lutheran theology – and along the way we make our choices; sinful choices, faithful choices. And our God watches over our journeys, rejoicing in our faithfulness, mourning in our fallenness. But as we near the passion days ahead, we know through faith that there will be feasting and dancing and celebrating for all of us as we return to the saving power of the cross, as our gracious and loving God proclaims us lost but now found, dead but now alive in the promise of Easter morning.

And then our work as God's people begins anew as we live as those who have been welcomed home. But – like Dorothy and the other saints in our lives – we struggle with what it means to live up to the good news of radical reconciliation and forgiveness and generosity and love that we witness in the story of the prodigal son. It is hard to accept the grace of God's reconciliation, especially when it makes the claim upon us that we too are called to forgive, to

be reconciled to God and each other, to prepare for the bountiful feast and celebration that brings all of God's creation together. But even when it is difficult – even we don't quite think we can forgive – God is there, showing us the way, walking with us, loving us even when we are lost, longing for the day when we will be found and return home.

At theological moments like this, I have turned again and again to these wonderful lines, first written by Polish Rabbi Nachman, which sum up for me the promise and the implications of the story of the Prodigal Son, this story of the arc of God's reconciling love for God's faithful people who live in the real world:

Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.

All time is made up of healing of the world.

Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.

Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken. This is what the father in our parable teaches us. My son who was lost has broken my heart. I mourn that he was lost, that he has squandered all he was given. But now he returns and I run to greet him and welcome him home. For me, this is a remarkable statement of how our God enters into the messiness of our human history, grieves our fallenness and awaits our return with generous and joyful anticipation. Our God shares in our pain and suffering, waits patiently and expectantly for our return, and thereby calls us to the feast of reconciliation. This is the work our reconciling God calls us to be about.

All time is made up of healing the world. Those who have been reconciled to each other, those who believe that all has been accomplished through Christ, those who live in the mean time, are called to be vigilant to where Christ is in our midst and to what Christ requires of us. We are called to heal the world. We are called to be what Luther called "little Christs" as we serve our neighbors no matter what. This is a meaningful part of our work at Augsburg. Our institutional calling, which we currently articulate this way: *We believe we are called to serve our neighbor*, makes the claim that faith, learning and service can never be separated because God intends that what we believe (the gift of faith), calls us to be educated (the privilege of an education), so that we might be of service (the obligation of reconciliation for all God's people).

We are called to the work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we are called to heal the world, we are called to serve our neighbor, we are called to the great feast that lies ahead. We will grapple with our doubts – like my friend Dorothy and so many of the rest of us – but we also know what God intends for us and we believe that all has been accomplished in the cross of Christ. "Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken." What a remarkable gift, what an awesome obligation. May God grant us the courage and wisdom and strength to be God's faithful people in the world, once lost and now found. Thanks be to God. Amen.