

I invite you to open your Bibles to today's scripture text which can be found in the book of Luke, chapter 15, verses 1-32. This can be found on page 740 in your pew Bibles. As we continue in our series "The Peace Makers" today's scripture magnifies the marvelous, undeserved forgiveness that God has given to us through Christ, and to inspire people to imitate that kind of forgiveness to others.

Our Father's Word

15 Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

13 "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. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' 20 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.

21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 "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. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 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.'"

NIV

What do the book “Robinson Crusoe”, the movie “Castaway”, and TV shows like “Gilligan’s Island” and “Lost” have in common? They all tell of a person who is lost. There is something immediately captivating, which evokes our empathy, when we hear of a lost person. All of these stories are about survivors of a great wreck who are cut off from the world, separated from loved ones, forced to fend for themselves, without help, without home, left for dead. Lost.

But there is a more profound way in which a person can be lost. In the movie “Lost in Translation,” the main character’s career has all but died out and whose life is absolutely empty. The tag line for the movie was “*Everybody wants to be found.*” Everybody wants that; everybody wants to be found and embraced and told, “You belong here.”

Do you think that’s true? Listen to a very revealing statement. In his book on postmodernism, Reality Isn’t What It Used To Be, Walter Truett Anderson includes this quote from a lost teenager:

“I belong to the Blank Generation. I have no beliefs. I belong to no community, tradition, or anything like that. I’m lost in this vast, vast world. I belong nowhere. I have absolutely no identity.”

That’s a much more profound sense of being *lost*...of being *cast adrift*.

The Bible is a story about being lost in this latter sense, this deeper sense. And that is what chapter 15 in the gospel of Luke is all about. There is no chapter of the New Testament so well-known and so dearly loved as this chapter. It has been called the “gospel in the gospel,” as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus Christ came to tell. In response to the attitude of the religious leaders of his day, Jesus tells three parables or stories about the lost.

These parables arose out of definite situations. The Pharisees and scribes resented the fact that Jesus fraternized with people who, by the orthodox, were sinners. They didn't show grace to these social and moral lepers, who were referred to as "The People of the Land," and they resented Jesus' doing so. There was a complete barrier between the Pharisees and scribes and the people of the land. Money was not entrusted to them, testimony was not taken from them, secrets were not trusted to them, they were not made custodian of charitable funds, and it was forbidden to have business dealings or accompany them on a journey. They were even forbidden to be the guest of any such person, or to have them as a guest. It was the Pharisee's deliberate aim to avoid contact with the people of the land, who felt it was unnecessary to observe the petty details of the Law. We will understand these parables more fully if we remember that the strict Jews did not say "There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents," but they said, "There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God." They looked sadistically forward to the destruction of the sinner, not to the saving.

No Pharisee had ever dreamed of a God the way Jesus presents him here in these parables. Jesus tells them, when a sinner who goes astray is found, when a lost sinner is found, or when a sinner returns to his father, God rejoices with the angels in heaven and celebrates with great joy. A great Jewish scholar has admitted that this is the one absolutely new thing which Jesus taught men about God – that he actually searched for men. The Jew might have agreed that if a man came crawling home to God in self-abasement and prayed for pity he might find it; but he would have never conceived of a God who went out to search for sinners.

We believe in the seeking love of God, because we see that love incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to seek and to save that which was lost.

These Pharisees hurled a charge at Jesus: “This Man receives sinners and eats with them!” The charge was true, of course. They thought it was blameworthy but actually, it was in fulfillment of the very purpose for which the Lord Jesus came into the World.

It was in answer to their charge that the Lord Jesus recounted these three parables. The first parable is about a shepherd’s lost sheep. The second, about a woman’s lost coin. And the third, about a Father’s lost sons.

All three parables are about being lost and the joy of being found, but they are not simply three ways of saying the same thing. There is a difference.

The *sheep* went lost through *sheer foolishness*. It didn’t think; most people would escape sin by simply *thinking about the situation in time* avoiding being lost like the sheep. The coin was lost through *no fault of its own*. Like the coin many people are led astray; and God will not hold someone guiltless who has taught another to sin. But the third story is different from the first two. A lost sheep and a lost coin are like a misplaced wallet or purse or keys.

The third story tells of something far more deliberate and terrible. The son *deliberately went lost*, callously turning his back on his father. Jesus says that to some degree we are all lost in the most profound way of all—we are lost from God. Get this-- it is not that God lost us as a woman loses a coin, or as a shepherd loses a sheep.

No, we’re lost ... because we’ve left God.

Jesus is really talking about two kinds of people, which we might divide up in various ways: for example, the religious and the irreligious. But in terms of peacemaking in your own life, you might look at it as the offender and the offended.

Like the sheep, we've wandered away. Like the coin, we've slipped out of the hand. Like the younger son, we've run away from home. Like the older brother, we refuse to sit and eat with our heavenly Father.

Let me ask you, do you need peace and reconciliation in your life? Do you want a renewed life with God? The first step is knowing that you're lost. Seeing that you've gone astray. Not merely knowing your wounds, but knowing your waywardness.

But that can be difficult. We men have it even harder than the women. You know, we drive around without a map and never humble ourselves to say, "I need help. I got lost! Can you give me directions?"

So how do you know you're lost? There are several indicators. For some it is the plaguing sense of guilt for a wrong done. For others, it is the self-condemning tape message we play over and over again in our heads.

Still others feel enslaved to some bad and disgusting habit; you hate it about yourself but you can't seem to stop. For others, it is the despairing self-resignation that you can't change. "That's just the way I am."

Even Christians can be lost from God. Jesus called it "little faith." You see it in prayerlessness, lovelessness, no longer reading the love letters from God, his Word. You find it in a general thanklessness, or joylessness in singing his praises.

The French have a word for it—ennui. This is such a prevalent feeling that the word is commonly used in English.

Ennui literally means annoyance. But it has come to mean a free-floating dissatisfaction and boredom that sets in upon the soul and makes life tasteless. The typical way people fight against it is by turning up the volume on life and entertainment.

And that is what we Americans are doing as only Americans can do. As thirst is to the body, so ennui is to the soul. And like real thirst, soft drinks don't satisfy. Only real water does.

Today, if any of you are feeling lost, wallowing in your sin, wandering from God, if your life seems tasteless, if you are fearful of returning to God for what he might say, I have good news for you. God offers real water to thirsty souls. He offers real welcome to the lost who left and who want to return. Jesus says, "God is a welcoming Father."

As I just said, these three parables are Jesus' answer to the charge of the Pharisee's, the mutterings of men about his welcoming and eating with "sinners." The men muttering are religious people. The "sinners" they are talking about are the irreligious people.

The religious people view themselves as being on the inside of God's attitude and agenda. They think they know what God is up to and doing. The outsiders are admittedly clueless. They know they don't know what God is about and doing.

The religious people thought that God was like a great employer. Do good work and you keep your job. The irreligious thought that God was a harsh employer, so they left.

But both the religious and the irreligious thought the same about God. They all viewed him as an employer. Work hard, get paid. They both thought that you could calculate God's attitude toward you by adding up your good works. If you've done well, God is happy with you—at least for the moment. If you've been lazy or failed to follow the rules, God is pointing you to the door and telling you to leave until you shape up.

Jesus knows this! He knows very well the kinds of thoughts people have about God. So, he tells this story of a Father and two sons. And what he tells us shocks us ... if we listen like good Middle Easterners.

First, let's look at the younger son.

(The request)

The younger son appears to us to make a simple and reasonable request. "Father, give me my share of the estate." He wants his inheritance ahead of time. And the father appears to respond in a reasonable way. He divides up the inheritance between his sons.

But to the ears of someone from the Middle East, the son's request comes with shock.

Kenneth Bailey, a biblical scholar who has lived 40 years in the Middle East, says that he has had hundreds of conversations with people in the Middle East

about this story. He asks them, “Have you ever heard a son ask for his inheritance?” And do you know what is the typical response from Middle Easterners?

NEVER!

Could anyone ever make such a request?

Impossible!

Bailey then asked: If anyone ever did ask, what would happen?

His father would beat him, of course!

Why?

Because asking for an inheritance means the son wants his father to die! Did you know that? What appears to us as a simple request—tame, reasonable—is in reality not a request, but a curse. It is shocking. And it says a world about this young man’s heart.

Any Middle Easterner knows only too well what this son has done. He has openly, publicly—before the entire community—cursed his father, humiliated him, insulted him, embarrassed him, and yes, in his murderous heart—as much as murdered his father. And that’s why Jesus told it. He wanted us to be shocked.

Jesus knew that most of us don’t understand the severity of sin. For many of us, sin is a mistake. Sin is just “blowing it.” Doing something bad. But for Jesus, sin looks more like this son’s request. Sin is wishing God were dead. Sin is the human desire that God would die. Sin is a way we curse God by our actions. Like the son, sin is leaving God. Yes, we are lost. But we are lost only because we have left.

But look at how the father responds...he's been insulted, he's been humiliated before the entire village, and he lets his son leave. He gives him his entire share of the inheritance. The father does not respond in kind...when insulted, he does not retaliate. Despite the murderous thoughts of his son – despite the public humiliation – he lets him go. I think the father knows that if he is to have his son, he must have him for the right reason...the son must love the father.

And that again reminds us of the mystery of sin. People in conflict are in conflict because of sin. And sin has a mystery to it. How can the son leave such a home? This is not a dysfunctional home...this is a home where the son is cared for every day – where every day he eats with his father, and his father makes everything available to him ...and he still says, “Yes, and I wish Dad would die so I could take my money and run.”

Jesus goes on to tell how the son squanders his money, falls on desperate times, finds himself starving to death, and then comes to his senses when he is down in the pig pit.

But again, here appearances are deceiving. In verses 18 and 19 we read that the son says, “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 one of your hired men.”

Sounds good to you? Sounds like he came to his senses? Most of us think so. But surprisingly enough, the son is mimicking the words of a very wicked and manipulative man in the Bible.

In Exodus, the second book in the Old Testament, we are told that God sent a plague of locusts upon Egypt. And after that plague, Pharaoh cries out to Moses, "I have sinned against the Lord and against you" (Ex. 10:16). But Pharaoh is actually playing for time until he can get back at Moses.

So, the wording of the prodigal son's confession is the first clue that things really haven't changed. This son hasn't really come to his senses. He has a plan to go back to the farm. Yes, indeed. But not to return to his father.

This is borne out in verse 19. Listen again to what he says: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of *your hired men*."

Do you see what the boy wants? He wants to pay back the money he squandered. He thinks he is at least good enough to be a hired hand. Yes, he's not worthy to be a son, but he thinks, "I blew my estate...but I'll pay you back."

Let me ask you. Does that son think of his dad as a Father or as an employer?

Isn't it as an employer? He doesn't expect his father to accept him as a son, not full and free acceptance.

He returns, not to be a peacemaker, not to be reconciled, but to seek a position. He returns, not as a son, but rather as an employee.

In one sense he was right. He was "no longer worthy to be called a son." All that he had formerly possessed as to rights and privileges as a son, he had squandered when he cursed his father and showed utter disregard for his family. He had taken off and wasted all he had been given. But he thinks that he can still repay.

The son seems to have calculated his losses and made a good business plan to recoup what he lost. Yet he did not calculate one thing —he never counted on his Father’s response. He never suspected the kind of response he’d receive from the Father he had insulted and wished was dead.

How does his Father respond? Listen again:

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. . . ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate (Luke 15:20-24).

Did you expect that? You expect the shepherd to go after his lost sheep. You expect a woman to search for her lost coin. But you don’t expect this.

When you lose your wallet, I expect you to search for it. If you lose your car, I expect you will look long and hard for it.

But when your son steals your wallet, totals your car in a drunken spree, we don’t expect you to run out to meet him, kiss him, welcome him home, call for a party, and say, “Let’s celebrate!”

Do you expect that response? Think of how you responded the last time someone cursed you, insulted you, wished you were dead.

No, Jesus tells this story to hook us. He knows what we expect. He knows that whenever and wherever this story is told—whether in the 21st century or the first century, in the USA or in Bangladesh—we all expect God to look at our performance, grade us, and respond in kind. It is justice we expect, not mercy. It is wages, not grace. And Jesus says, “Wrong! You don’t know my Father.”

So, he gives us the unexpected.

Instead of the community catching and condemning the boy before he gets home, the Father runs to greet him while he is still on the way.

Instead of a harsh reprimand, “How many times have I told you ...?” we find a kiss. Instead of “Well, you made your bed, now you can just lie in it,” the Father dresses him in the best of robes (a sign of full acceptance). He puts a ring on his finger (a sign that the Father trusted him in a remarkable way). He puts shoes on his feet (a sign of being a son, not a slave). And he calls for a feast and rejoicing (a sign of full reinstatement into the family and community)!

Instead of condemning his son, the Father runs to greet him. He seals his forgiveness with a lavish celebration. That’s how God loves the lost. That’s how he loves the religious and the irreligious. That’s how he loves the offender in a conflict.

That, says Jesus, is how God loves you and me—the ones who have left God.

But that is not where the story ends.

(The elder son (vv. 25-32))

In one sense, all we’ve heard so far is just a preparation for the story of the elder brother.

(The rejection)

The time of feasting has begun. A calf being killed tells us that the entire community is invited. This is a grand celebration. Grand, that is, for everyone except the elder son.

The elder son is working in the fields: he's a good boy, stays home, works hard for his dad. Makes the family prosper. He honors his father, he honors his family, and he honors his community.

He hasn't messed up. He hasn't done drugs. He hasn't been a drunk. He hasn't squandered his wealth. He saves faithfully. He's a good son. We all love to talk about that kind of son: He's a good son, he brings honor to the family name.

So he comes in from the fields and he hears the music and dancing! He asks one of the servants or young boys outside the home, "What's going on?" And he's told, "Your brother has returned. He was lost and now he's found." And what is his response? He becomes angry and embittered. And he refuses to go in to the celebration.

Wouldn't you? Don't you hate it when the kid who causes all the trouble gets the most attention, while you've been so good? So yes, we expect the elder son to get angry. But there is more that is going on. Again, Kenneth Bailey's expertise is helpful here.

In the Jewish culture it was the custom of the elder son to be present at such a celebration. He holds a semi-official role. When the father is having a feast, it isn't just for the nuclear family. The whole village is there. The elder son belonged right beside his father. So his defiant refusal is a major insult to the father.

But what does the father do? Does he ignore his son or send a servant to command him to come in? No. He goes out—the second time he has gone out for a son—and speaks to his son.

But listen to how that elder son responds to his father, who has already been insulted and embarrassed by his younger son. If the prodigal son was doubtful of his father's love, the elder son is downright antagonistic. He murmurs and complains and wallows in self-pity.

(Luke 15:29-30) “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. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

What do you think of that? Does he see himself as a son or a slave? Does he see his dad as father or an employer? Does he know himself and his work as that of a son and an heir or just as the best employee?

Yes, the younger son surrendered his soul to his passions. But the elder son surrendered his soul to his pride and self-sufficiency!

This elder son accuses his father of being a fool; worse, he accuses his father of neglecting to pay what he owes—he thinks the father has cheated him. You can easily imagine the stinging tone in his voice as he says, “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.”

“You stupid old man, you cheat! You task-master!” That is what the elder son is saying. Again, this is a public accusation. When the father left the feast, do you think the guests kept eating? No, they followed him out and watched the confrontation. They heard the elder son sully his father’s name and reputation. He embarrassed his father just as surely as the younger son did.

The elder son’s rejection shows us another aspect of our own hearts. We don’t want anyone to offer hugs and kisses to those who have done wrong; no robe or sandals on the feet or a new gold ring. We don’t want to celebrate. When others have done wrong, we want justice, not mercy. We want payback ... somebody has got to pay. Restitution must be made.

The Father’s response

And we expect the father to give him a tongue-lashing. But what does the father say?

“My son, ... you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 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” ((Luke 15:31-32)).

Even though the elder son deserves a severe rebuke for publicly defying his father, the father responds with the same kind of mercy he extended to the younger son. The father reaffirms his love for the defiant older son, gently admonishes him, and reminds him of the inheritance that will always be his. He seeks to draw him into the celebration of repentance and reconciliation.

Both of these sons were lost in their sin and their rejection of their father. One gave himself over to his passions, the other to his pride and self-sufficiency. And yet the father's love was unquenchable. He continued to extend grace and mercy as he sought to draw his sons back to himself.

That is Jesus' point. We don't know how great the Father's love for us is—how much he welcomes us home. How ready, willing, and eager he is to forgive—with no strings attached!

In this story there is one final thing we do not expect—the Third Son.

(The third Son)

You may be looking now to see if you have the right Bible. What third son? Doesn't Jesus only mention two? Well, you haven't fully understood the story if you miss the third Son.

Who is the third Son? He is the one telling the story. Jesus is the third Son. He is the insider who truly knows the Father's heart, and he is telling us that this is what God is like—a welcoming Father to rebellious, bitter, foolish sons.

Why is the Father so willing and eager to welcome lost sons? Because Jesus, his only begotten son, lived a perfect life and fully paid the penalty for all of the wrongs we have committed. He received the harsh rebuke, the just wrath, the severe punishment that every wayward son deserved. Jesus has paid for all our sins and thereby opened the way for all of us to return to our Father's loving arms.

Because of the perfect third Son, our heavenly Father is waiting for his sons to return—for you to return— so that he may bless you, forgive you, accept you, and celebrate over you with the whole host of heaven.

And we don't have to look up to heaven to find that this is true. For in telling us the story of the welcoming father, Jesus is pointing to himself and reaffirming, "Come to me. I am the way to the Father. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father."

A few days or months later, on another occasion, Jesus would tell the people, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19.10). And a week after that he would prove his love by giving his life as a ransom, as a payment for the sins of the sons and daughters. Justice was done... there was "payback." And yet three days later—for the religious and the irreligious, for the offender and the offended—the Father would raise Jesus from the dead and say, "It is paid back. Paid in full. Welcome in... Welcome in... Welcome in!"

Conclusion:

If you have been part of our church for the past several weeks, you have been learning an approach to peacemaking called the "4 G's." The parable of the prodigal son and his elder brother reminds us that the foundational "G" for all peacemaking is the **G**ospel of Jesus Christ.

Peacemakers are people who understand the lavish, undeserved love, mercy, and forgiveness of our heavenly Father, and delight to reach out to others who are lost in conflict and lead them back to the Welcoming Father through Jesus, his perfect Son. In response to the Gospel, you can be inspired to "**G**lorify **G**od" in the midst of conflict instead of pursuing your own selfish agendas.

Because of the Gospel, you can begin to "Get the log out of your own eye." You are no longer condemned, because Jesus has paid for your sins. Therefore, you don't need to cover up or hide your wrongs.

You can look at your sin and confess, “I was wrong. But my Father loves me, and he has embraced me, and he has put new sandals on my feet. My Father in heaven calls me his son!”

In response to the Gospel, you can seek to “Gently Restore” those who have wronged you – even as the father in this parable earnestly sought after and gently restored his wayward sons.

And because of the Gospel, you can “Go and be reconciled.” Having tasted the forgiveness of your Father in heaven, you can share that same lavish forgiveness with others. For whatever they may have done to you, it is nothing in comparison to the debt of sin that Jesus has already paid on your behalf.

You have a Father who loves you beyond words and sent his Son to seek after you, to pay your debts, and to open the way for everlasting forgiveness and reconciliation. All he asks of you today is to run into his arms without hesitation, and to then turn around and open your heart and arms to those who need your forgiveness.

Challenge: Think of someone you know who is “lost” and in need of Jesus’ forgiveness and love. Then, find a way to point this person to the loving arms of the welcoming Father.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your Love, for your amazing Grace,

For sending your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ the Prince of peace.

Whose arms are open, seeking us, and welcoming us to come to you Father.

Forgive us when we have rejected your love, in pride and self-sufficiency,

wandering from you, leaving you as we pursue our own passions.

Grant us strength to turn from our wicked ways, help us to be

compassionate towards our brothers and sisters, offering them forgiveness,

just as you have given us your Grace, may we extend grace to those

who have offended us, gently restoring peace through reconciliation.

May we give you all the praise, the honor, and the Glory as we

Go out to share the Gospel to all that we meet.

AMEN