

March 6, 2016  
 Lent # 4- Come to the Waters  
 Trinity UMC  
 "From Exile to Community"

Scripture Luke 15: 1-3, 11-24 Roberta  
*All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*<sup>3</sup> Jesus told them this parable:*

*<sup>11</sup> Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. <sup>13</sup> Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.*

*<sup>14</sup> "When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands." ' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.*

*"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! <sup>23</sup> Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting<sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

Come to the Waters—

- Return—Return to God with all your heart
- Repent- Turn away and turn toward
- Claimed- We are **claimed** by this God that quivers in anticipation to be in relationship.
- Covenant-God's covenant with Abram and with all humanity- God takes the risks—in response we covenant with each other—prayers for each other
- Community

## Prayer

Have you ever lost something and at the time it seemed to be the most tragic thing in the world? When I was a sophomore in high school- I had such an experience. During Christmas break I traveled with my parents, my older brother and my two younger siblings—in one car- not a mini-van—to visit relatives in Iowa. My boyfriend at the time- had given me one of those really cool identity bracelets for Christmas and I wore it proudly on that trip—turning it over to see the words “Love, Ron” on the back.

After a fuel stop in Wyoming, we were back on our way for at least an hour or so before I realized that my prized identity bracelet was no longer on my wrist. I looked all around the car, in my purse, where I was sitting and I could not find it. Of course, I attempted to convince my father to turn around because this bracelet was the most prized possession in all the world but the best I could get him to agree to was to stop at the same place on the way home to see if there was a bracelet in their lost and found—who else would want a bracelet with my nickname “Berty on the front” and “love, Ron” on the back?

The bracelet was lost forever though, even though my dad kept his word and stopped at the exact same gas station on our way back to

Oregon about a week later. At the time, I did not appreciate the teasing that I received that Christmas about the lost bracelet. I was sure that it was a sign—that my relationship of several weeks was ‘doomed’ since I had lost a gift. Of course, now, it is a story to laugh about especially after Ron broke up soon after we returned to school because he had gone home to Canada and decided that his previous girlfriend was the one for him!

This story from the gospel that we will be focusing on for two Sundays is about being lost. Now I realize that this little story about a lost bracelet does not compare with the story that some of you live with each day—that of a lost son or daughter, a lost parent due to declining health, especially dementia, or a lost relationship that has been broken and you can’t find a way back to forgiveness or reconciliation. Loss is a difficult soul journey.

Seminary professor Sharon Ringe writes about a class that she taught in early September 2001 about the ‘parables of the lost’ from the first ten verses of Luke 15. They started out the class by sharing experiences of losing things...lost keys, lost pets, maybe even lost identity bracelets, but the seminary students could not quite understand the extravagant joy of the characters in the parables. They had not experienced losing anything in their lives that would lead to the extreme joy

of finding it that was exemplified in the first parables of a lost sheep and lost coin that Jesus shares prior to telling the story of the lost sons.

A few days after that seminary class on lost things, the attacks of 9/11 occurred. All over the city, posters with photos began to appear: “Lost: my wife Susan. She worked on the 93<sup>rd</sup> floor of tower # 1”. “Has anyone seen my brother Miquel? Or “our daddy is missing! help us find him!”. When the class reconvened, the conversation about the ‘lost’ biblical texts had changed.<sup>1</sup>

Today we have heard the story of the younger son, next Sunday we will focus on the older son in this parable that Jesus shared. Most of us know this story as “the prodigal son” but there are many different titles for this story—“ The Lost Sons”, because really both sons are lost to the extravagant love and mercy offered by their father or in some other versions of the bible the story is called, “The welcoming Father”. Titles were never original to scripture—they have always been someone’s interpretations to the story so coming up with new titles that fit with our various perspectives can be a helpful biblical interpretation tool.

Perspective matters. Mark Allan Powell several years ago, did a study about the main theme of this story from Luke 15 of the two sons and

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Ringe. Commentary on Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32. Working preacher

the father. He asked the same question but to people who came from different parts of our diverse world. He discovered that our perspective makes a difference in how we understand stories. He asked people from North America, Russia and Africa the question—why did the prodigal son end up where he did? The answer from Russia was famine. From Africa the same question was answered because no one helped him. From North America the answer to the question- why did the prodigal son end up where he did was—because he squandered his living. Famine, because no one would help, and squandering his living—were different interpretations and perspectives taken from the context of the experiences of culture.

Let's look a little closer at the story. The younger son after receiving his inheritance has traveled to a far off country—he has lived excessively and extravagantly and had friends while he had money but then became isolated when the money ran out. This younger son is having a crisis—both an internal and outer crisis. Physically, he is hungry and alone. He finds a job feeding pigs which as a Jewish man, is abhorrent. To survive he eats the leftovers from the pigs.

The inner crisis is his understanding as to how far away from home he is both literally and metaphorically.

I am reading a book called “dust and glory” from an English author this Lenten season for my daily devotion. This book has opened my eyes to a different perspective to this younger son.

In the Hebrew ( Jewish) story telling—the kind of story telling that Jesus engaged in—the main point is put at the ‘middle’ of the story not at the end of the story. In the story of the younger son, the turning point comes in verse 17 of the passage—in NRSV, we read “he came to himself”, in the Common English which I read earlier we read, “He came to his senses”.

What a revealing phrase—one that all of us can identify with. We have all had experiences when we or someone we have loved have ‘come to our senses’ or come to ourselves?’

*“The far country is not just a physical place for the son. In a very significant way he has been in exile from his own self. He now sees where his behavior and choices have led him. He knows he has blown everything. His only option is to return home and cast himself on his father’s mercy. Perhaps he will be taken on as a servant, somewhere out of sight, where he will at least have food but cause no further harm.”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> David Runcorn. *Dust and Glory*, Kindle edition. “From the far Country”

When the younger son comes to himself—he is awakened to how far away he is from his home, his families, his friends, and his purpose for life. He turns and goes home, not knowing how his father will respond to him. The younger son, only knows that he cannot continue to live so far away from himself, so far away from his identity as a younger son so he returns to his father.

In the Lenten book I am reading, there are three chapters on this story of the father and two sons. The third chapter is titled “The prodigal father”. We usually think that the word prodigal is a negative- it is someone who is wasteful. Yet, Runcorn reminded me that the word prodigal has a positive meaning—the father is prodigal in his behavior towards the younger son. He responds with overwhelmingly generosity, which is way over the top and many people( especially the older son) would say wasteful. He lavishes his younger son with love and respect. This father does not just walk to meet his younger son, he runs to him.

There is some biblical commentators that suggest that one reason why the father runs is in order to intercept his son before the villagers reach him and lynch him, so great is the shame that this younger son has inflicted not only on the household of the father but the entire community. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Runcorn. *Dust and Glory*. Chapter title “The Prodigal Father”.

Anne Lamott writes—*“I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us.”*

After a time of exile from his family, his community and even himself, this younger son experiences this mystery of grace. It meets him where he is as we humbly returns ready to be a servant in his father’s household yet does not leave him there. He is welcomed not only back into his father’s arms but back into his community. He is changed by the extravagant show of grace and love showered on him by his father.

So where do you find yourself in this story of the younger son? What is your perspective? Are you in the process of ‘coming to yourself’? What is nudging you to ‘come to your senses? Perhaps you identify more with the father who is waiting and watching and praying, as you wait for a loved one to return to their senses. In whatever situation you find yourself, I invite you to enter into the mystery of grace that meets you where you are but does not leave you there.

Next Sunday, the story continues as we explore how the older son is also invited to ‘come to his senses’ and return to the mysterious grace offered by the prodigal father, even though the older son never left to travel to a far off country, he very much is also a lost son.

Wherever we find ourselves today, may we have the courage to examine our lives and enter into the mystery of grace.

We are invited to enter into the mystery of grace as we remember our baptismal covenant.

We are invited to enter into the mystery of grace as we join together to pray for one another.

We are invited to enter into the mystery of grace as we once again, as we come to our senses about all of the broken places in our lives.

We are invited to enter into the mystery of grace as we come to the table that is open to all.

My friends, let us enter into the mystery of grace that meets us where we are but does not leave us there- Let us move from exile to community. May it be so. AMEN.