

"LOST AND FOUND"
March 4, 1990

TEXT: Luke 15:13 "Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country and there he squandered his property in loose living."

No doubt most of you recognized this morning's scripture as the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is certainly one of the most familiar stories in all the Bible. Some might even say, "too familiar." Having heard it over and over again, perhaps you wonder how anything very new or different could be said about it.

But "God hath yet more light and truth to shed forth out of His Holy Word." And this morning I would like us to look at this story from a somewhat different viewpoint. My title is "Lost and Found", and, as we think about this story, I would like us to consider two basic questions: "What does it mean to be lost?" and "What does it mean to be found?" Neither is as simple as it seems.

In the course of my ministry, I have discovered that most people have pretty much the same answers to those questions --at least where the Prodigal Son is concerned. They think of him as lost in sin. They see him as greedy and immoral. Greedy because he asked for his inheritance while his father was still alive. And immoral because they assume he was some kind of terrible sinner off in that "far country."

If they are right, then "being found" obviously means repenting his sins and turning his life around. Not a bad topic for the first Sunday in Lent. Unfortunately, that interpretation involves two very serious problems. First, it is not supported by the facts. And, second, it makes the story almost totally irrelevant.

Let us take a look at the facts. Scholars point out that it was not uncommon for a man in Jesus' day to divide his property prior to his death. In asking that his father do so, the younger son may have been a bit "pushy," but he was hardly greedy. His portion was firmly fixed by long-established custom, and there is no indication he ever asked for more than he had coming.

Nor is there any reason to think that he did anything so very sinful while away from home. In the part I did not read, his older brother makes that accusation, but he was in no position to know. And, though our English translation says "he wasted his substance in riotous living", the Greek word "asotos" only means "careless" and "undisciplined." That, by the way is also what the word "prodigal" means: "wasteful, reckless, or

extravagant." He may have been foolish, but we have no proof that he was truly immoral.

Furthermore, there is no sign of any real regret. Jesus says, "But when he came to himself he said, How many of my father's servants have bread enough and to spare but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father" When he gets home, he does say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But he never expresses any real remorse. He never says, "I'm sorry." He never promises to change. It may be that he just wanted a better life than tending pigs. And the sin to which he confesses may be nothing more than the sin of extravagance.

But the biggest problem is this. If we think of him as grossly immoral, we make him, by and large, irrelevant. We are all sinners, of course. Most of us, if pressed, would probably admit as much. But I suspect that very few of us here this morning are grossly immoral. And, when we make this a story about some terrible sinner, it becomes something to apply to others, but not to ourselves.

I do not see this story as irrelevant. When I read this story, I think it applies to all of us. I see the Prodigal's lostness as stemming, not from what he did after he got to that "far country" but in going away in the first place. I think his sin was not so much immorality as separation. And, if so, then he is not someone else; he is you and me.

We were created to live in fellowship with God. But most of the time, like the Prodigal Son, we chose not to do so. In one way or another each of us chooses to leave our Father and go off to live in a "far country." How often do we say to one another, "It's my life, isn't it?" Our favorite songs include Frank Sinatra's "I Did It My Way" and Sammy Davis, Junior's, "I've Got to Be Me." We may no longer play them or sing them, but most of us live them.

We never deny God, much less curse Him; we simply ignore Him in our day to day living. God is just no longer a very high priority with us. We may go to Church on Sunday --though fewer and fewer even seem to do that-- but our prayer life is perfunctory, our Bibles go unread, and we make our plans and decide our decisions with little or no conscious reference to God. The Prodigal's sin is our sin --the sin of separation.

But, when we live like that, sooner or later, we wind up in a pig-pen. I do not mean that we do anything awful. But we were meant to live in fellowship with God, and, when we do not, life just never seems to be as meaningful as it should.

Sometimes we see it in our outward circumstances. Sometimes it is just something we feel inside. But life is not really abundant, and we know it. That is why seemingly intelligent

people sometimes ruin their lives with alcohol and drugs. That's why so many more try to hide themselves in work of recreation. That is why so many live their lives in what Thoreau called "quiet desperation." One of my favorite poems is "The Hound of Heaven" by Francis Thompson. I would like to share a portion of it with you now.

"I fled Him down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated
Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after
But with unhurrying pace,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy
They beat --And a Voice beat
More instant than Feet--
All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

Perhaps it is not so with you. Perhaps life is wonderful just the way it is. If so, I am happy for you --unless, of course, you just are just kidding yourself. But I know only too well the shallowness of my own life. I know too well the difference between days when I make the time to be with my heavenly Father and those others when I think I am too busy to do so. I know too well the truth of Augustine's great prayer, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee."

If I am right, and being lost really means separation, then being found means not so much repentance as reconciliation. It means saying to oneself, "I will arise and go to my father." It means living in His presence, not in that "far country which so many of us fashion for our selves day by day." It means making a place in our lives for God, not just one hour a week but all the time. It means trading in our pig-pens for the joyous celebration of life as it was meant to be.

God is not some stern impartial Judge but a loving Father who longs to welcome us back. Who day by day watches the road for some sign of our return. Who wants to receive us back, not like one of His hired hands, but as His beloved son or daughter. When Jesus wanted to let us know what God is like he told this story. He promised that no matter how unworthy you and I might feel, God wants us back. He wants to throw a party --with us as the guests of honor.

The choice is ours. It has always been ours. And it always will be ours. We can go on living in our high-tech pig-pens. Or we can go home to our Father, where we belong, where we are loved, where life is good even when it is hard. The choice is ours. What choice will you make?