

The scribes and the Pharisees said “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” You can practically hear them sniff with disdain, can’t you? “This fellow welcomes sinners [sniff] and eats with them [eewww!].” And Jesus replied “Yes of course I welcome sinners and eat with them! How could I not welcome people who turn away from the path of destruction and come to me instead? How could I not eat and drink with people who have chosen to live rather than to die? Do you not understand when what was lost has been found, the thing to do is rejoice?”

Of course, Jesus doesn’t say that to the scribes and Pharisees in so many words. As he so often does, as any good wisdom teacher would do, Jesus gives the scribes and Pharisees his answer in the form of a parable—a deceptively simple story that has a surprising twist of meaning, a story which is intended not just to give them information, but to get the scribes and Pharisees to wake up and witness in a new way what God is doing in their midst.

There was a man, Jesus said, who had two sons. One of them, the younger one, takes his share of the estate—a grievous insult to his father while he’s still living—and travels off to a foreign country and gets lost: lost morally, lost emotionally, lost financially, lost in self-indulgence. And when he hits rock bottom—feeding hogs, which, for a good Jewish kosher-keeping boy, is a fate worse than death—when he hits rock bottom, he comes to himself, he remembers who he is, who his true self is, where his true home is. He figures even being a hired hand on his father’s farm would be better than slopping hogs for a stranger, so he sets out for home. And when he’s still a long way down the road, his father sees him, and runs out to welcome him, and dresses him up like a proper heir of the estate, and calls together the entire household, the entire neighborhood, for a party, a *huge* party, and he says “The son that I had lost has been found.” When what was lost has been found, the thing to do is rejoice.

But remember: the man has *two* sons—and one of them, the older one, doesn’t like the idea of rejoicing when his younger brother comes home. The older brother is out in the field—where, apparently, he spends most of his time, working like a slave for his father and resenting every minute of it—and when he hears the music and the dancing and rejoicing for his stupid, lazy, wastrel brother, he is so outraged that he refuses to go in. He won’t even acknowledge the returnee as his brother, but sneers to his father about “this son of yours.” The older brother is *lost* out in that field: lost in his anger, lost in his resentment, lost in his jealousy, lost in his stifling sense of self-righteousness. And so the father goes out to him—just like he went out to his younger son, now the father goes out to his older son—and he tries to remind him of who he really is, tries to recall him to being a proper heir of the estate who shares in everything his father has, tries to explain to him that when what was lost has been found, the thing to do is rejoice—and *he* can be found by rejoicing, too. The parable doesn’t tell us what the older brother does, whether he insists on staying lost in his anger, or whether he is willing to be found and come in and join the party. But the cliffhanger end of the parable makes the message doubly clear: When what was lost has been found, the thing to do is rejoice.

So what does that say to us? The fact that the parable leaves us hanging has the effect of putting the question squarely to *us*: How do we get lost? How do we get found? How do we rejoice?

How do we get lost? How do we go astray in the wilderness? How do we waste ourselves in self-centeredness and self-indulgence? How do we get trapped in self-repression and self-righteousness? I think sometimes we get lost by forgetting who we are, by forgetting who we are called to be—forgetting that we are heirs of God’s household, that we are the people of Christ, that we are gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do extraordinary things in the midst of ordinary lives. I think sometimes we get lost

by being scared of our own potential, by not taking the risk to stretch ourselves and see what we could do. I think sometimes we get lost by taking the easy way out, by choosing the lesser good that seems to be satisfying at the time, but cuts off possibilities for even greater good later on. I think sometimes we get lost by thinking that our lives don't really matter to God, that our hopes and aspirations and fears and prayers are too ordinary or too small or too mundane to be significant to God, that the Ruler of the Universe couldn't possibly be interested in the likes of us—so we decide not to “bother” God with our prayers, we don't make the effort to be mindful of God in every aspect of our lives, we put our relationship with God in a little box marked “For Emergency Use Only” and tuck it away in a corner until we feel we *really* need it—and if we get too used to doing that, we can make our relationship with God such a tiny portion of our lives that we effectively cut off our best chances to grow in knowledge and love and compassion and wisdom and discipleship and all those things we say matter to us. Like the brothers in the story, I think we get lost by forgetting who—and *whose*—we are.

What do you think?—how do we, individually and collectively, how do we get lost?

And how do we get found? In the story, the younger son comes to himself, he remembers who he is, and his father comes running out to welcome him. How do we remember who we are, and how do we recognize the One who comes out to welcome us to the place where we belong? I think we remember who we are by concentrating on the practices of the faith, we remember we are Christians by doing Christian things—things like hospitality and discernment and contemplation and justice and worship and thinking theologically and celebrating beauty. I think we get found when we have the courage to admit when we've been wrong, and then not to get stuck in that but to move on to new ways of being more right. I think we get found when we realize we can't do it all on our own, and we trust in the Holy Spirit to come in unexpected ways and make us able to do what needs to be done. I think we get found when we climb up out of the ruts we sometimes get ourselves in, and take the risk to be enthusiastic about trying something new. I think we get found when we decide to give up being afraid. I think we get found when we do our very best, confused and mixed-up as our best may be, I think we get found when we do our very best to follow Jesus.

What do you think?—how do we, individually and collectively, how do we get found?

And how do we rejoice? In the story, the music and dancing of the younger son's coming-home party is so loud the older son can hear it all the way out in the field. Wouldn't it be wild if the music and singing and celebrating at Trinity on a Sunday morning were so loud the people could hear it all up and down West Beverley Street? Wouldn't it be something if the sound of our joy in serving God was so clear that people could hear it at Noon Lunch, and in the benefit concert, and in the nursing home room on a pastoral care visit, and in the roller rink on a Sunday School outing, and in the hospitality of opening up our space for meditation groups and AA meetings and classes on mystics and neighbors of all sorts and conditions, and in mission from here all the way to Haiti and Honduras and who knows where? Wouldn't it be great if the sound of our rejoicing in being found in Jesus Christ were so unmistakable that everyone who came through our doors on any given Sunday morning could not help but have their own joy resonate in return? Isn't that what we do here at Trinity all the time?

What do you think?—how do we, individually and collectively, how do we rejoice?

The scribes and the Pharisees complained about Jesus, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” And Jesus replied, “Of course I do. When what was lost has been found, the thing to do is rejoice.” And we are welcomed by Jesus here today, and we eat with Jesus here in this communion, and we rejoice with Jesus, now in this Lenten season of preparing for the Paschal Feast, and always. Amen.