



First United Church of Oak Park

We are Made for Compassion

Luke 15:11b-31

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When I was a sophomore in high school, a group of my friends decided to form a sorority, the first sorority my high school or community would ever have had. Make no mistake about this. This was not going to be one of those service-based sororities that functioned for good in the wider community. This was going to be one of those exclusive sororities, just for the in group. It was going to organize, structurally and by name, who was accepted and who was rejected. Who was in and who was out. To be fair, the girls who thought this up were not trying to be nasty, though they were quite good at that when they put their minds to it. They were trying, instead, to do something that they thought would be fun for themselves and their friends. They gave little thought to those who would be left out. It was a naïve idea, poorly thought through.

However naïve it was, this sorority was a bad idea. The high school, to its credit, squashed it flat. The sorority died before it got off the ground.

That kind of mindset, wanting to define the boundaries between who is in and who is out, who is good and who is bad, is not new. It has been around a long time. We see it again and again in the gospels, often through the confrontations that Jesus has with the Pharisees. Our text for today, for example, is set in the context of the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and including them in his ministry. The Pharisees think that Jesus should set tighter boundaries. They are uncomfortable with his inclusivity, his insistence that the boundaries of God's love and care are set in places quite different from where the Pharisees think they should be.

Who is worthy of being in? Who needs to be kept out? There are times when we need to ask these questions for safety's sake. For example, in children's ministry we monitor who can appropriately watch our children, and I'm sure that everybody here this morning affirms the need for us to be very careful about that.

Jesus does not push back against this necessary kind of boundary setting in this text. He pushes back against the other sorts of boundary setting we humans tend to do, the boundary construction that is driven by wanting to maintain our comfort zones or our privileged lifestyles or the identity of our particular communities. We may think that one or more of these boundaries is necessary for the sake of our safety, but Jesus questions that. He pushes back against the sorts of policies that do things like build walls on borders, or segregate communities, or label people who are different from us as unorthodox or, even worse, as criminals.

It's in that context of pushing back against the boundaries we construct that he tells three parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a prodigal son. With these parables he makes an interesting rhetorical move. He refuses to get pulled into a conversation about insiders and outsiders and where boundaries should be drawn between people. Instead he invites us to look at our relationships with other people through a different set of lenses. Instead of talking about who's in or out, he suggests, let's think about who's lost or found. In doing that he reframes, re-envision, how we think about each other.

I remember witnessing a lost and found scene on a beach vacation I took many years ago. A little boy was lost. I noticed it when the lifeguards held him up and displayed him – he was about three years old. They obviously hoped that his parents would see him and come get him. It was about a half an hour before his mom arrived. He had wandered quite a way down the beach, and she had been busy looking for him all over another part of the seashore. I can only imagine how long that half hour was for her and her son. When she finally arrived at the lifeguard stand, she was wiping tears from her eyes. When they lowered the child into her arms, mother and son hugged each other tight. I watched them walk down the beach until they were almost out of sight. She never released her grip, nor did he. The boy was lost, and now he was found. They both seemed very glad.

To be lost, and then to be found and brought again into your mother's embrace, and then into the embrace of your family – this is to know God's good news, the good news of being loved simply for who you are. This is to know God's good news that you matter enough for someone to look for you until they find you. This is to experience God's good news of being received found and welcomed home.

I once was lost, but now I'm found. Late this week I read a news article about the Department of Homeland Security requesting an expansion of its authority to do many things, including being able to deport unaccompanied migrant children. This article was like so many things I read or see about immigration policy. It was framed exclusively in terms of insiders and outsiders: citizens and aliens/migrants, who should belong and who should not, who has the right credentials and who lacks them.

Jesus' conversational moves in this text remind us that the insider-outsider conversation may not be the only way we can frame this issue. Imagine how different our conversations about unaccompanied minors might be if we talked about them differently, not as insiders or outsiders, but as lost children who need somebody to find them. Imagine how different our conversations would be if we were able to see these children like the little boy wandering down the beach. We do not know why all these kids left home – war, gang violence, domestic violence, poverty, abandonment, death. What we do know is that they are somehow lost, and they are doing nothing more than trying make a new home. What if we were to talk about finding them, instead of just keeping them out? How different could this conversation would be? I'm not suggesting our conversation about unaccompanied minors would be any less difficult if we were to shift our frame; this situation presents huge challenges, I understand that. But if we were to reframe the situation the way Jesus does with these parables, maybe we could begin to see some new opportunities. Maybe we could begin to think about safety and security in different terms.

At the heart of this parable is the father's compassion for both his sons. Compassion drives father to reframe situation before him. The father's thinking does not appear to be driven by the concerns we might expect, such as birth order and the privileges ordinarily given to an older son. He does not seem to be driven by the particulars of the situation, either. This dad does not let one son's selfishness and the other son's resentment and self-righteousness get in his way. The father's behavior in our story is not about what his kids have done, or haven't done, or might do. The father's behavior is about his love for them, his tenderness, and his longing to restore his family.

That love is transformational. Remember the movie "City Slickers?" Billy Crystal and his two friends are on vacation; these New York City residents have decided to be cowboys for two weeks. In the company of other vacationers and a few professional cowboys, they drive a herd of cattle across New Mexico. At one point in the movie, they find themselves on their own and they and all those cattle are standing on the side of a river. They need to get to the other side. It is pouring rain, and the river is surging downstream. In the driving rain, they begin to move the cattle across the river.

They do it. All the cattle cross, and the men are starting to cheer, when all of a sudden Billy Crystal looks back and sees a young calf, only a few days old, unable to swim across because the current is so swift and the calf is so small. Billy Crystal yells the calf's name, "Norman!" and he jumps into the river to try to save him. The storm is bad; the current is strong; and Crystal finds himself being swept downstream, unable to save himself or the calf. His friends run along the shore, trying to reach him and pull him to safety. After several unsuccessful attempts, they finally grab him, and Crystal and the calf are pulled to shore. The three men lie exhausted and relieved on the riverbank, and they begin to laugh. Their hearts filled with joy, they laugh and laugh and laugh.

There is deep joy in the parable we ponder today. It is, perhaps, the joy of the son who was welcomed home, no questions asked. Perhaps it will eventually be the joy of the older son. Hands down, it is the joy of the father, whose son was dead but is now alive, whose son was lost and is now found.

In "City Slickers," the three soaking wet men on the riverbank laugh with exhaustion and relief and joy. They laugh because Billy Crystal has just done this crazy thing and jumped into a river to save a cow named Norman. They also laugh because Crystal himself has been saved. In the same series of events, Crystal saved and was saved simultaneously. This is how transformation sometimes works.

Though Jesus does not talk about this, I suspect that the father's own transformation is a dimension of his joy.

We save and are saved at the same time. We find and are found. It's not that we earn something, but that we discover or understand the two truths in each other. We are both mother and child on the beach.

There is joy in knowing this. That joy, known in being found and finding, is finally what this parable is all about. In saving, we are saved. In finding, we are found. In reaching out and embracing outsiders, we discover that we are embraced and brought home. It is a joyful way to live. It is Jesus' way to live. This parable invites us to join him in that life. Amen.