

What Does It Mean to Be Lost?

Sermon for a Mission Festival

Sermon Text: Luke 15:11-32



And He said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' ²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

The drug addict Stephen is covered with wounds from his head to his toes. Sometimes, he is so completely confused that you can't have a single rational conversation with him, for example: he stands on the corner of the sidewalk and curses his own shoe that he is holding up in the air. As far as I know, Stephen has no contact with other people and that's not just because you can't have a normal conversation with him, but he also smells horribly. Last year, I already thought that he was soon going to die. But he is still alive. There are very few days where Stephen can speak completely clearly. On one such day, he once told me about his mother who still lives in Leipzig. He also told me that he could go into a clinic if he wrote a letter of motivation about why and for what reason he wants to be free from drugs. I was amazed when he conjured up such a letter with very clean and legible handwriting in about half an hour. Stephen longs to go back home, but he doesn't know how to go about that, and he also doesn't know how he will be received if he goes back.

In the story of the prodigal son, Jesus presents us with a parable that is very similar to the story I just described. Jesus tells us this parable about a person who has sunk so low that he must now work with pigs and even longed for the pigs' food. For a devout Jew of that time, there was nothing lower than working with pigs. The prodigal son didn't first become lost when he landed in the gutter. No, he was already lost the moment he said in his heart: "I demand that which is coming to me and am taking off!" Why did the son leave his father's house even though everything was going well for him? Unlike in the parable of the lost coin, the prodigal son isn't simply lost, rather he intentionally takes off. What didn't he like when he was with his

father? It's probably because he wanted to separate the giver from the gift. So the son wasn't lost only when he was in dire straits, but he was already lost when he willingly wanted to leave the fellowship of his father. Basically, the story is a tragedy which is very human and affects us all personally. And the extremely difficult question is this: How do we get out of the situations in which we have lost our way?

Back to Stephen: I tried to convince him to go to the clinic and found it to be astonishing and incomprehensible that he didn't want to go. I asked myself: Why would a person not want the path to life when this path is so obvious? And why would a person want death more than life? I asked these questions and then thought of so many other similar situations where it is the same. Is it not the tragedy of human beings that we make the wrong decisions and usually don't know it when we do? Why should people brutally slaughter one another in war when there is another way? You can say that from the outside, but honestly, isn't it always the case that if we get lost in this or that self-made wrong path, we can't figure out how to get out of it ourselves? Yes, not only is it not possible, but we also don't even know how to get started on figuring it out ourselves. I have to take a look at myself and recognize that this is exactly what happens to me. First, the perspective of another person shows me where I have gone wrong. Some hearts long to turn back but don't know how to do that. These people have no one else who can guide them. Many people long for God's love but don't want to say it in exactly those words. These people also have no one who will tell him or her: Don't you know how much God loves you?

In the story of the prodigal son, we receive the answer to this exact question. God's unending and limitless love is to be shown, spoken, lived, and proclaimed clearly, plainly, and distinctly through the parable of the prodigal son. This parable isn't about the lost son, instead, it's about the limitless love of the father. Strangely enough, neither the various sins of the lost son nor the sincerity of his repentance seem to be important in Jesus' parable. Yes, one could say that the prodigal son merely returned to the father for strategic reasons because he was hungry. Through the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus doesn't hold the son up to us as an example of repentance and change, but instead Jesus holds up God and His grace as an example. In this story, Jesus truly lets us catch a glimpse into God's workshop. And what does God do? The entire time, He does nothing else except to longingly wait for His broken, lost, egotistical son. Yes, the entire time, the son had no idea how much God loved him! If even one is lost, He cries, cares, mourns, and leaves everything behind just to get that one lost person back. Ever since Adam and Eve had sinned, God called: "Adam, where are you?" And God is still out searching for lost people. He called us through the words of the prophets. In the end, His own Son was caught between the millstones of human wickedness. And still, God searches for His lost children and never gives up. Over centuries, He sent out apostles, teachers, missionaries, and completely normal people. These people should be God's voice to His lost people. And every time the Holy Spirit opens someone's heart and they return home for whatever reason... yes, then you can look into the depths of God's love. With tears in His eyes, He holds the lost sinner in His arms, and a whole storm of love makes all dishonesty, deceit, and hypocrisy disappear. All that remains is joy felt from the bottom of our hearts. Even in heaven, there is a great celebration and God let's everyone know how good it is that His son, His daughter has returned.

An awe-inspiring principle is established in this parable: God's joy over sinners who repent. When God embraces sinners, He acts according to His own character – without a doubt, it is a great joy and surprise for the lost son to be embraced as a true son again. But that's not the most important part, which is the joy of the father. The father says: "Let us eat and celebrate!" The parable that Jesus holds before us here wants to invite us into the story. The story of the prodigal son is not unknown; there are a million variations of it. Even in my life, I can find myself in the story again. How often have I lost my way, gone down the wrong path, or had nothing good in mind with the special gifts God has given me? And then the return home... the wonderful feeling of being held in God's arms, being embraced by Him, to know that God is completely by my side and that everything will be OK because God loves me beyond my expectations and is so good to me. But we also

know the other side of the story which is the side of the calculating and severe older brother. The older brother wasn't happy that the sinner was back again and had received forgiveness. Our love is not like God's love. Our love has limits. We differentiate between good and bad, accepted and rejected. We are calculating and ask ourselves whether it is worth helping the drug addict if he relapses after all. "This brother of mine gets a big party thrown by our father?" the older brother angrily complains. In doing so, the older brother looks at his own supposedly good deeds. He forgets everything he has received as a gift from God. Yes, he even seems to have completely forgotten God and His good deeds. He excludes himself from fellowship with the father and grumbles about his brother: "this son of yours." By denying the sibling relationship, the elder brother also cuts the connection to his father, because if the prodigal son is the father's son and no longer a brother, then he is no longer the father's son. He can't be the father's son but not have a brother. The older brother doesn't even realize that the hatred towards his brother is also applied to his father. His own accomplishments are what separate him from the love of the father. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor," Jesus once said. By this, He meant the Pharisees who had calculatedly imagined a God of the Law. Oh, if only we would allow ourselves to be moved by the goodness of God instead of by rigid laws and supposedly right paths. When will we realize it? God doesn't love us because we are lovable! God also loves those who are completely broken and who have nothing but shameful deeds to show for it. And when we look at the people in our immediate neighborhood, there are so many who need God and His presence, so many who can no longer find the way into God's arms. This is often because we stand in the way. We place ourselves between God and our fellow human beings so that the way to God is blocked. Our fellow human beings can no longer even see the dear Father, who still extends a friendly invitation. Instead, they only see us, grimly holding up the Law.

The parable that Jesus tells us has an open ending. I am curious to see what happens next. Did the furious older brother come to an understanding and reconcile with his father and brother? Was there another reconciliation and big celebration? Or did he then pack his things and take off? Maybe the prodigal son did the unthinkable and let himself be fed, only to then steal his father's things a second time in order to squander everything again? We all know enough stories like this. And what's more, how did this story affect the Pharisees? In the background, both the Pharisees and the older brother must have been asking the question: Why? Because it's clear that the younger son committed an incredibly heinous act. Is there not even a punishment? Shouldn't the crime be atoned for? And why reward instead of punishing? The open question will be answered by once again looking into the workshop of God's love and asking ourselves who it is that is telling the parable of the prodigal son. It's Jesus! After all, it is Jesus who not only speaks of an ever loving, ever forgiving Father, but also represents in person the covering of the guilty accounts through His own person. Jesus is the Father who runs to meet His lost children, in the flesh! Jesus is also the indispensable prerequisite for God's boundless love and the call of God which has been from the beginning of the world. Adam, where are you! The old Adam finally and definitively comes to rest through Jesus Christ, in that Jesus is what we all are not, perfect, and He takes our place. He is the Son and at the same time the Father with His open arms. Amen.