

“A Passion for the Lost”

Neil Engle
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Text: Luke 15:1-32

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

The average individual carries two lists in his or her pocket. The first list is made up of folks we know and like – our loved ones – folks for whom we have a heart of love. The other list is composed of those folks we don't like – there are names of individuals or names of groups on that list. We've got a good list and a bad list – a right list and a wrong list.

Jesus spent much of His time talking and being with people on the wrong list – sinners, low lifes, the rejected – and what's more He seemed to enjoy it. Well, that really bothered the Pharisees. The Pharisees really believed God has a heart of love for some and hatred for others. What about us? Do we believe that God loves only certain people and doesn't want much to do with some others?

When His critics came face to face with Jesus to confront Him with their charge of excessive compassion for the sinners and the weak, Jesus told them three stories. The first had to do with a lost sheep and a dutiful shepherd who searches out and takes into his arms his straying sheep. The second was that of a woman who loses a coin and sweeps her whole house and searches until she finds it. Jesus moves from 100 sheep and 10 coins to one son.

Jesus tells us the story of the young man who preferred to sow his wild oats in the big city rather than plant grain in his father's fields in the farm country. A man lived with his two sons on a large farm in the country. One day the younger of the two boys comes to his father with a surprise announcement. “Dad, I've had it with the chickens and the crickets. They gross me out totally. I'm leaving for the big city – the big time. This place is the pits.”

The father pleads with his son. “Are you really going to leave me? You know how much I want you and need you here.” But the younger son doesn't have much sympathy for his father's plea. “Gimme a break dad. Save the sermon and just give me the cash. You've been saving a long time and you were going to give me half, weren't you? Well, cash in one of those CDs and give me my money – while I'm still young enough to enjoy it.”

Well, the father reluctantly gives his son his inheritance and watches the screen door slam as he leaves. The father's heart is no doubt heavy with grief as his son, wallet bulging with inheritance, walks away without even a backward look over his shoulder. That's not the hardest part. The stories are coming back from the cities. “Hey, mister” people returning from the city called out to him, “that's some son you've got. You must be real proud of him. It's strictly sex, drugs, and rock and roll.” His close friends and neighbors give him that sad knowing look that's hung like a wreath around the neck of “fathers who have failed.”

Meanwhile, famine strikes, unemployment rises high – higher than ever before. And the small town boy with the big-time dream soon comes to the end of his bankroll. And you know, all the bums for whom he has bought drinks so often, and the streetwalkers who have welcomed him into their arms for a nominal sum, don't seem to recognize him anymore or even remember his name.

He staggers from one to the other, begging for a job. He has a sign “WILL WORK 4 FOOD.” I'll do anything. Someone half seriously offers him a job. “Tell you what, fella, I'll give you a job. You can feed the pigs on my farm. For your pay it's all you can eat at the ‘husks and swill smorgasbord.’ What you don't eat, give to the pigs. It ain't much, but it'll keep you alive. We're in a recession, you know.”

So he takes it. And what he can keep down, keeps him alive, until once, while he's down on his knees at the pig trough, thoughts of home sweep like a flood into his mind. He experiences a kind of regret that is born of hunger and he decides to go home. That night, as he lies in the field waiting for sleep to come, he prepares a speech for forgiveness, and memorizes it: “Dad, I'm not worthy to ask you to take me back as a son. I really don't deserve it. But I was eating the husks and swill of hogs to stay alive. Then I remembered how you treat the hired hands on the farm, how you provide them with warm meals and soft beds. Dad, would you take me back as a hired hand on your farm?”

The first step is always hardest for us humans, especially when it means admitting we were wrong. But starvation has a persuasive logic that has often driven men and women to the most desperate needs. So the boy starts on the long road back home. It's twilight as he comes into sight. The father is sitting on the front

porch, his eyes fixed hopefully on the road. The neighbors notice that he was there every night since his son left home, always looking, always hoping until darkness settled in and he would finally take his heavy heart to bed. The human heart, someone once said, never really breaks – it just aches and aches and aches.

But this night was to be different. The aging eyes that had filled so often with the tears of bitter memories, fixed as usual on the road from the city, sees the figure of a man approaching. He begins to rise from his chair – his eyes now filled with a new kind of tear, and his heart begins to pound with a new kind of hope. He can tell – it's his walk, the way he swings his arms – all the things that only love notices. He scrambles off the porch, two steps at a time, runs out to the road, and he gathers his son into his arms.

The boy begins his memorized speech of repentance. But he doesn't even get to the part about being taken back as a hired hand. The father's firm arms embrace him warmly, and the son buries his tearful face against his father's neck. He can feel the sobs of joy in his father's chest; he can feel his father's tears running down onto his own face.

Then he hears his father's voice. "Quick, get a good suit out for my son. I don't want him in these rags. Get out the best of everything for him. Slaughter the best calf we've got and light the charcoal. We're going to have the biggest party this village has ever seen. My son is home!! My son is home again! It's as though he had died, but has come back to life again." The little farmhouse is soon alive and jumping with the smell of roasted calf and sounds of celebration – there's dancing, the stereo's volume is on 9 – there's confetti and streamers all over.

Amidst all this, the older son comes in from the field after a hard day's work. He meets one of the hired hands down at the well, and he asks. "What's going on at the house?" His face and heart turn to steel when he hears the answer. "The kid came home tonight." "My brother?" he asks. "You got it, your little brother," says the hired hand cynically.

"Listen, you go in there and tell my father that I'll never set foot inside that house as long as that kid is there." When the father gets the message of his older son, he comes out and goes down to the well. "What is it, son? What's gotten into you?"

"What's gotten into me? What's gotten into you? Look at this face. Remember me? I'm the one who stayed here. Look at these hands. See these callouses? That's from work – hard work on this farm. They're the hands that worked twice as hard when he went away. I was there that night, remember? I heard him tell you how behind the times you are, how fed up he was with everything you are and stand for. I was here when the stories came back from the city and broke your heart. I heard you sobbing half way through the night, and I've learned to hate my brother with everything in me. Now he comes home, and you give him a great big party. What's wrong with you, dad? Boy, there's no fool like an old fool. You never gave a party like this for me and my friends. I never got a party – and I'm the one who stayed here."

The father puts his arm over the shoulder of his older son, and gently moves him in the direction of the farmhouse. "Son, you're right. You deserve a party for your faithfulness, and you can have one anytime you want it. Everything I have is yours. I understand how you feel – I really do. But there's something I would like you to try to understand: what goes on in the heart of a father when his child who was lost comes home to him. Try to understand how a father feels when his child who wandered comes back to life again."

I do not know what it feels like to lose a child through death – I can only imagine the pain. No, I really can't imagine. I do not know the heartache of having a child disappear into thin air, nor the anguish of having a grown child sever the relationship with his or her parent.

Nellie was a member of a congregation I served in Sheridan, Wyoming. Nellie's husband died while I was serving the church. I helped her with funeral arrangements; I took her to the cemetery on the first memorial day following his death. Their only son Chuck wasn't around. Chuck was a drifter – an alcoholic – and for nearly two of the four years I was there Nellie knew nothing of his whereabouts. One day he just took off, never phoned, never sent letters, she never knew whether he was dead or alive. She had no way to tell him of his father's death. Lo and behold Chuck decided to resurface. He lived with Nellie for awhile and then he up and took off – then, no word, nothing. Nellie wasn't a complainer – for years she took care of her ill mother, her husband died of cancer, arthritis had her using a walker, and Parkinson's disease had reduced her voice to a whisper. She would talk about Chuck, her only child, born late in life after several miscarriages; she would talk and cry and ask, "Why doesn't he come home?"

Why doesn't he come home: Why does he stay away? Why does he break his mother's heart? WHY? Why do we often distance ourselves from those who love us the most? Why do we often distance ourselves from God? There is a saying: "If you no longer feel close to God, remember it wasn't God that moved." I suspect many of us here today would like to feel closer to God. We honestly believe we are a hungry people – we're spiritually hungry – we want to be fed. Sometimes we don't know what we want. It's as if it's 11:00 at night and we're standing with the refrigerator door open, we don't know what we want to eat, all we know is that we're hungry. I suggest that for hungry Christians, the question of God is still the only question in town, a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Sometimes that relationship is disrupted – distance occurs – because of our feeling that we've been somewhere, said something, done something so horrible that God would just as soon have us stay away – that finally we had moved beyond the reach of God's loving arms.

If we're honest, we all have felt that way – sinful and that we had stepped over the line – like the son in the parable no longer worthy to be called a child of God. We know we've been wrong, we come to ourselves, then what? We know we need God's forgiveness. Can God forgive even this?

You know, I suppose the Pharisees were dumbfounded to discover that retrievals bring rejoicing. The shepherd doesn't beat the lost sheep – he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. When the woman finds the coin – she celebrates – when the son comes home, the man throws a party. When someone is found, there's an unbelievable celestial celebration – at God's party, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are at the head table and in the banquet hall there is a 100 foot long banner with letters 10 feet high spelling out the name of the found sinner. Our name is there, when we are found, even when we say in our heart of hearts, "Heaven ain't throwing a party for the likes of me."

God's willingness to forgive is beyond our imagination, whatever condition we are in. God wants us to come home, to welcome us with a love that runs down the road to meet us. Does that seem unlikely.? If Chuck ever shows up on Nellie's doorstep, do you think she'll stand inside the door, questioning him, berating him and heaping guilt on him? What do you think? What would you do?

O God, we thank you that even when we stray from you and wander into strange and selfish and dark places, you seek us out and bring us home again, into your loving arms. Amen.

(Thanks to John Powell for his retelling of the parable.)