

We Are Inseparable
A Sermon Preached By
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The Third Sunday in Lent
Luke 15: 1-32

Friday night while watching a little March Madness basketball, a commercial came on that caught my eye. Maybe you have seen it too. It follows a thirty-something single “world-weary” man as he goes through his day, beginning with his morning commute on the train. He is alone, but when he glances at a poster by one of the train doors with the picture of a white terrier on it, along with the words, “Adopt a Pet Save a Life,” the dog is suddenly sitting next to him. Once at work, the man clicks “like” on a Facebook ad to support veterans and the man in the ad suddenly appears next to him and gives him a nod of approval. A bit later we see him walking on the street, followed by a group of folks living on the margins of our society – the homeless, the ill, and the uneducated. A man with long, unkempt hair and dirty clothes is carrying a sign, “Anything helps.” Another is in a wheelchair. There is a woman pushing a shopping cart of random items, ostensibly her worldly belongings. And a youth in a hoodie wears a backpack. These are just a few of the characters. As the man moves along in his day, he keeps seeing this motley crew, even in his apartment that evening while he and his new dog are watching TV. He can’t get the image of them out of his head. The ad ends with him walking into a youth outreach center, as a voice in the background says, “Lift the weight of caring by doing good.”

This commercial is part of a campaign by State Farm Insurance to encourage folks to get involved in helping in their communities with whatever causes are important to them. And it offers a search engine to aid in connecting people to an agency at which to volunteer. The commercial is intentional in highlighting various areas of need in our communities – animal care, tutoring our youth, and supporting our veterans, just to name a few. But what stuck out for me, and the image I keep seeing, is the group of the needy folks standing together on the train, in his apartment, and on the street – people who live in our communities but whose lives are separated from ours in almost every way. And they only come together in the uncomfortable experiences of them asking us for help. Our lives are separated from others in myriad ways: race, education, economics, politics, geography, family, occupation, health, language – the list is endless.

And yet Paul proclaims something different to the Romans: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We are inseparable from God’s love. No exceptions – not even breaking the law. It is with these criminals, these “tax collectors and sinners,” that Jesus shares meals. These folks are not on the margins because of their lack of resources but because of their wrongdoings. They are like folks caught in acts of stealing, violence or selling drugs. These are Jesus’ dining companions. The tax collectors are named specifically because they were hated by Jews for their collaboration with the Romans and their greed exhibited in taking more tax from citizens than was due. It is with these people that Jesus ate – the ultimate act of hospitality and caring – the same people

that the upstanding Jews of the day, the Pharisees and Scribes, could not stand. And quite frankly, many of them would be folks that we couldn't stand either. These are people that rightfully should be behind bars, people who have separated themselves by their sinful acts, acts in which they turned away from God and hurt others, people who are a threat to the people around them. The communities were better off without these offenders around. Jesus responds to the Pharisees and Scribes' comments about the sinners with our three parables for today, often referred to as the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, three examples of God's relentless, risky, extravagant and sometimes seemingly foolish love for sinners.

The story of the lost sheep is perhaps the most unbelievable, from both metaphorical and literal perspectives. I doubt that any shepherd in his right mind would leave 99 sheep, animals of his livelihood and his life, in the wilderness to go on a wild chase for just one sheep. To do so, the shepherd is putting not just his job, but his life in grave peril, for losing the flock would mean no money for him, but also no food, no way to survive. While we might assume that there is a sheep dog there to keep the herd in line while the shepherd is away, scripture does not mention anyone else there with whom he could leave the sheep. And while it would be unfortunate to lose one sheep, it is doubtful that the flock or the shepherd would suffer greatly for just one lost sheep. Yet we find the shepherd relentless in his search for the lost lamb. And then, so joyful at finding it, he throws a "sheep-found" party! A party?! For a lost sheep being found? Such radical joy seems out of place. If anything, you'd think the shepherd would simply breathe a sigh of relief, not stop everything and celebrate! It doesn't make sense.

To add to our confusion, in the next parable the woman with the lost coin reacts in a similar, oddly, over-joyful way at finding her tenth coin. This coin may have been worth a week's wages; it may have been worth all of her deep searching. But even if it was, it certainly didn't make sense for her to throw a party – which probably cost the amount of the coin– upon its being found. Again Jesus tells us of radical rejoicing over a small thing that doesn't make sense.

Radical rejoicing, for what was lost has been found; what has been separated is together again! Never mind that those who were never lost were much greater in number. The one lost is just as valuable, in the eyes of Jesus, and celebration at being found is in order! The one who goes away and returns is also valuable. Unlike the two parables that precede it, the parable of the "lost" or prodigal son describes one not who gets lost and separated from his family but rather one who chooses to leave. One who chooses to leave after asking for his share of property that would belong to him upon his father's death. He wants his inheritance early, and he wants it right now. This younger son puts his family's financial security at risk by asking for the money prematurely. He is one who is lost in his own wants and needs and unable to see anything else. And so he asks and his father gives it to him. Then satisfied, the son leaves and travels to a distant country, where he squanders all that is given to him and becomes needy for the essentials of food and shelter.

Much time passes. The younger son's family remains at the homestead and daily life remains much as it was before the son left. The elder son works diligently and loyally for his father. And then one day, when the younger son is feeding pigs on a farm far from

home, scripture tells us that he “comes to himself.” He comes to understand his selfish ways and how those ways have caused hurt to his father. He returns to his home hanging his head, prepared for anger but hoping for forgiveness. To his surprise, he finds grace. His father is ecstatic to see him. The son can’t even get his apology out over his father’s exclamations of joy and then he orders his servants to prepare a feast for his son! Radical rejoicing, for one who “...was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.” There is no mention from the father of the son’s previous sins; the focus is only on his joyful return. Not so with the elder son, the one who has toiled endlessly at his father’s orders while his brother partied his inheritance away. The elder son is mad, and rightfully so. His father’s over-the-top celebration for his rebellious son is too much for this always-good, resentful, older sibling. The elder son is thinking: it just isn’t fair!

Friends, if you think the elder son is right, you are in good company. The father’s celebration of his son’s return wasn’t fair to the elder son. In fairness, the younger son deserved nothing from his father, having already received his portion of the inheritance. The robe and ring and sandals given to him at his homecoming were actually part of what was owed to his brother. The lavish treatment received after the son’s selfish, sinful act is unfair and seemingly foolish. And that is how God works. No matter how selfish we are, how far we travel, and how we squander what is given to us, God’s faithfulness, God’s compassion and God’s love for us have no end. Paul’s words are true: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Friends, we are inseparable from God’s love.

Sadly, many things separate us from one another, including resentment. For the brothers, at the end of the parable, we do not know if the elder one was able to celebrate the homecoming of the younger son. The last words we hear from him are shouted at his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But, when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” (Luke 15: 29-30). These words are filled with hurt, resentment and frustration. They are words from one unable to see the situation from anyone else’s perspective but his own. For the father, and for God, it is not about keeping track of who did what, but about rejoicing when one comes home. Period.

Here this again: “For God, it’s not about keeping track of who did what.” For any of you who are people-pleasers and do-ers like me, that reality is a hard one to swallow and a reality that is completely counter cultural. Success by definition is accomplishing *something*. Doing. Achieving. Rising up in the ranks and setting ourselves apart for others. If we are not careful, we can get lost in this act of doing and forget why it is we are doing at all, and then our success ceases to be of God but rather only takes us further from our creator. From the son’s comments to his father, it is clear that over the years he forgot why it is he worked for his father – out of respect, love and gratefulness – and focused only on the work. No wonder he got burned out and bitter! He may not have gone to a distant land, but I think the elder brother becomes lost in his own life even as his younger brother is found.

We don't meet the elder son again, but perhaps in his future there is a lavish celebration of being found too, for that is what brings God joy! These parables describe to us the reality of God's love – a lavish love showered upon all people – sinners and righteous alike. It is a love that looks beyond the sins of a person to see the heart and soul, for all are created in the image of God.

As we continue our Lenten journeys of walking in Jesus' ways of compassion and justice and love, we would do well to look at others to see their personhood, that which we share with them, rather than all of those other things that separate us. It sounds pretty easy, but it's not. Take a moment this week to write down all the ways that you are separated from other people in the community — from upbringing to occupation to offspring. And then try to get to know folks beyond those groups. Engage in meaningful conversation with them; eat with them, rejoice with them. Perhaps like that world-weary man in the commercial, you will find a place to serve and be with others in your community not like you. Or you will reach out to a neighbor you've never quite had time to meet. Or you will shower your own trouble-maker sibling with unearned grace and love, rather than appropriate judgment and blame. If we are able to do this, friends, we will be walking and *living* in the ways of Jesus, ways of unconditional love that cannot be separated from us. May it be so. Amen.