# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“The Lost Older Son”**

**Luke 15:25-32**

 **September 25, 2022**

We have been studying Jesus’ parables in Luke chapter 15 where Jesus tells three stories featuring lost things. He tells these parables in response to the complaint of the Pharisees and teachers of religious law that he has been associating with sinful people. Jesus first tells the parable of a lost sheep that was found by the shepherd, and then the parable of the lost coin that was found by the woman. At the end of both parables he makes the point: there is joy in heaven when even one lost sinner repents and returns to God.

Jesus’ third parable has two parts. We discussed the first part last Sunday in which the rebellious younger son, having wasted his life in a far-off land, comes to his senses, returns to his father, and is welcomed back with great joy. Today we look at the response of the older son to his brother’s return. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 15:25-32

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’ The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’ His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

Jesus’ story reveals two very different attitudes toward those who are lost through the respective actions and words of the son and the father. Jesus first calls our attention to the attitude of the son. He comes in from the field where he’s been working and hears the sounds of a party. He asks what’s going on and is told that his brother has come home and his father is celebrating his return. We would hope for some kind of positive response from the older son, but he is angry and refuses to go in and join the celebration. When his father comes out and urges him to share in the joy of his younger son’s return, the pent-up bitterness of the older son comes out. While his brother was sinning in a far-off land, the older brother’s heart was becoming increasingly hardened toward his younger brother.

Notice his emphasis on himself as he focuses on his hard work and obedience. He doesn’t feel like he has been rewarded enough for being the “good son,” and it is certainly unfair that his little brother, the “bad son,” is being treated so well. Notice also his disdain for his brother. Refusing to acknowledge him as his brother, calling him “this son of yours,” he believes that the behavior of his sibling justifies his contempt.

When we believe that a person is beneath consideration, worthless, and deserving scorn, then we have become like the Pharisees in Jesus’ audience. When you and I feel like we have worked hard to stay right with God, but have not received our deserved reward for our supposed “goodness,” we become resentful of God’s mercy toward those who have not been as good as us. We say to ourselves: “Why should they be rewarded with the same salvation as me when I have clearly worked so much harder for it?” With little understanding of the grace of God, we justify our hard-heartedness toward others.

The older son is lost. In some ways he is more lost than his younger brother was. He, too, is in a far-off country – the far-off country of a self-centered and contemptuous heart toward those who are lost. He is so busy judging others that he is unaware of the hardness of his own heart. He is so caught up in what he believes should be God’s attitude toward the lost that he has completely misunderstood what God’s attitude toward the lost actually is. This is why he doesn’t understand his father’s love, mercy, and joy at the return of his brother.

What is so wonderful about Jesus’ story, both for those of us who are like the younger son, lost in our willful sin, and for those of us who are like the older son, lost in our self-centeredness and contempt, is that the father loves us both. He comes to us with his mercy, and when we accept it, when we turn from our sin and repent, whether of bad behavior or a bad attitude, he receives us with joy. Repentance for the younger son meant learning to say “father” again. For the older son it meant learning to say “brother” again.