

Who Got Lost (The Prodigal Son/Girl) – Final version  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

This Monday evening, I am delighted to be invited by the General Secretary of the United Church of Canada, Nora Sanders to be part of the panel discussion on the future of the church. I will be one of the panelists to discuss with a closed group of personnel to explore the most important things churches should be doing.

This morning I have a confession. The confession is this: I procrastinate a lot when it comes to sermon writing, especially writing the Chinese text. Every week I look at the gospel text and also other possible texts and make a quick decision which one to preach on. Then I study it. It doesn't take long thought comes to my mind. By Tuesday afternoon, I know what I will say, but to put it in writing is hard. After writing the Chinese text, the job is only half done. I will use that text as a base to writing the English text. Sometimes I write the English text first, sometime the other way round, all depends on my mood!

Each week, whenever I think of writing the Chinese text, I procrastinate. Oh, I say to myself, wait for another day. The thought continues to develop. I carry this thought with me for several days until a time I longer procrastinate. It isn't too different from writing academic papers.

Somebody describes this process as pregnancy. Preachers got 'pregnant' every week. It is comparable to a woman giving birth to a baby. Preaching is easy; the formation of idea that leads to preaching is hard. Preaching has two wings: delivery style and content. Delivery style varies and fun. Creating content is a challenge. With God's grace, most of the time 'the baby' comes out in good shape, but sometime deformed, sometime pre-mature. I am deeply honoured to be part of the profession that allow me to got pregnant every week.

This is an allegory, don't interpret literally.

This morning we hear a very familiar text. This is a powerful text with so many things to say. Is it true? Or its popularity and familiarity have overwhelmed us years ago. It ends up giving us very little motivation. A little bit fatigue. You may ask: How can this be?!

This text is about a surprise party. It supposes to energize us and motivate us, just like what surprise party should do. The goal is to to surprise him or her, or a group of people. But sometimes, surprise party backfire and everything intended is still there, but no surprise.

In this text where we know so well, it presents a picture of divine acceptance so radical and swapping that it has sometimes generated astonishment and provoke outrage. But the shock value has worn off. The power brownout in this story can be a victim because of the result of over familiarity.

Even when the first line, “There was a man who had two sons...” Oh, I know what happened. It is like watching Star Wars movie over and over again. By the time you watch the fifth time, no surprises anymore.

The original intend of this story is to shock us with the surprise of the father who hike up his skirts and rushing down the road shouting for joy and calling for “A robe! A ring! and sandals!

The son who squandered his money has come back. The lost son or girl has returned. Family unification happens.

No matter how badly you have messed up, God is always forgiving and merciful. Just be courageous to pick yourself up. There is a plenty of forgiveness waiting for you. You can start all over again. God is love. God is merciful.

This story can be potential materials for a self-help best-seller where the story, the plot and the ending are so predictable that the story no longer shock us. This is one reason why I procrastinate when I preach an over familiar text like this one.

Today, I want to approach The Prodigal Son or Prodigal Girl a different way. It isn't about the younger Son or Girl's comeback to a gracious God.

One thing we cannot afford to over look is context that leads to this story. What is said before this parable. Why was it said? For whom it was said and what purpose?

If you hear the text just as it is read today, you have no problem. We read Luke 15, 1-3 and then jump right in verse 11-32. But to respond to some people who questioned Jesus choice of guests and friends, Jesus gave the parable of the Lost Sheep, then the Lost Coin, and then the story we have today the Lost Son.

These three parables have a common feature: it focuses on the action of the owner who either lose a sheep, a coin, or a son. Jesus answers their question: why should we care about these people, tax collectors, sinners?

Jesus meant not to articulate a different understanding of God, for graciousness of God has been firmly established the ancient Jewish prophet and national experience. They didn't need Jesus to teach them God is welcoming. The Book of Ruth, Isaiah and many more have told them so. But the intend of these stories was to invite these rigid people to think about the normal human experience and how even earthly parents will exercise compassion when their own children, no matter what they have done, where they have been, will welcome them and feast with them with great joy. Compassion is lifted up.

The story isn't about the Prodigal Son, not the oone who is lost and went away. The climax of this story is the older Son. The one who didn't go away, works hard, always stay in the house and do all the nice work.

When the older son saw what the father has done when the younger sons comes back, he was anger. He heard music, dancing and a feast was going on. He asked: what happened?

The servant says: your younger brother is back.

The text says: The older brother was angry and refused to go in.”

What? Hey, your brother comes back! It is your brother! No, he refuses to even go into the house.

We often like to use this text as a way to say God always welcome sinners when they repent. Sure, repent. God will welcome you. But this story is more than repentance. The son may have thought about what to say when he see the father, as the parable goes. But the development of the story is that the son has no chance to say all those things when he saw the father. The father, on the other hand, saw his son, what happened next...

3 adjectives

He RAN to his son...

He THREW his arms around him

... and he KISSED him.

This usually is one of the scenes in romantic movies. It is about love.

Before this son said one word... Before the father knows what reason his son is coming back. Before this son demonstrates good behavior. This young son has no chance to do all the good things his older brother has done. This father, just with the fact that he spots him in the distance, that is good enough. He initiates all the action: he runs, throws, kisses. And later he brings the best robe, and sandals, and he orchestrates a great thanksgiving feast.

This is family love in action. So I say...

For those family members thought of disowning their children when they came out as gays and lesbians. Go ahead. Just don't call yourself Christians.

For those people who thought God only love and bless certain people. Go ahead. Just don't say you understood the Bible.

For those people who don't want to open up doors to hungry people and less formulate people. Go ahead. Just don't say anymore we are a welcoming church.

If in our understanding of ministry and God, certain conditions apply, such as we expect certain people they will marry, dress certain way in order to be accept. Go ahead. Just cross out the section on unconditional love in our mission statement as printed in the bulletin. The church cannot function based on lies.

This parable is about the older son.

When the father reaches out to the older son, the older son basically asks three questions,

“Why are you so nice to him? Why are you so unfair? What have you done for me?”

Note the focus of his thought is always “I”. Himself. Never about the younger son and even the father.

This is a selfish son always staying in the house, always doing the right things, always serving the father. Yet, he is selfish.

Although he has done it the right way, seemingly living the right way all the time, he doesn't understand this father. They may be living in the same house, but they are far apart.

He is looking for extra reward, but there is none. He has done the right things with wrong reasons. He is no different from the younger son who needs forgiveness and love.

The beauty of this text is meant to invite the Pharisees and the teachers of the law to enter the compassionate heart of God.

Today, it invites us to think twice when we feel we are always faithful, always serving, always keeping God's law, we as Christians should deserve better treatment than those who have not behaved the way they should have behaved. It invites us to enter the compassionate heart of God. To see the younger son come back is easy; to see the older brother rejoice is hard.

No matter where you stand in this relationship, the younger one or the older one. The one who behaves differently or the one who always keeps God's way of life, God loves them both.

Whether you have wasted opportunity after opportunity or have been faithfully serving God in various ways and have judged others for not measuring up, God loves them.

I like the President of Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, Dr. David Lose's comment on this text. He says,

“Whether they think this news is the best in the world or barely notice it, yet God loves them. Whether they're in the church reluctantly or with joy, whether they have had a lifelong relationship with God, have just come to know God, or aren't even sure God really exists, yet God loves them...truly, madly, and deeply.”

Our challenge is to enter the compassionate heart of God and let God's gracious love crack-open a space in our hearts to be self-critical, open and even to disturb us.

Let's God unquestionable love for all people from all walks of life and form all cultures, whether they are faithful or not-so-faithful, committed or not-so-committed, gay or straight, rich or poor, men or women, friends, set a fire in us to re-imagining our mission.

May God's surprise party surprise us once more.