Sunday, March 26, 1995
LOST AND FOUND
Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

In a Bible study group I was leading, we were studying the parable of the prodigal son. When we began discussing the last part of the story, everyone in the group could empathize with the elder son who had stayed home. He had been a good and responsible individual and now felt cheated. One person in the Bible study group said, “Why be good? I agree totally with the feeling of the elder brother. His younger brother took off, squandered his part of the family inheritance, led a riotous life, and when he returned, he was given a lavish party. It’s almost as if he was rewarded for his bad conduct.”

Then another member of the group said, “It happens all the time. Read the newspapers. Someone gets into a lot of trouble, gets caught, then writes a book about it and becomes rich and famous. Why be good? It doesn’t pay.”

And then still another person in the group said, “The parables of Jesus seem to contradict all known laws of fairness. Another example is his story about a farmer who hires people to work in his fields. Some start at sunrise, some at the morning coffee break, some at noon, some in the middle of the afternoon, and some an hour before quitting time. Everyone seems grateful for employment until payday, when those who worked all through the day under a hot sun learn that the sweatless upstarts who put in barely an hour get exactly the same pay. It’s not fair.”

Someone else in the Bible study group commented, “Not only is there unfairness in the parables of Jesus, but remember the criminal on the cross next to Jesus. That good-for-nothing barely sneaked in under the wire with his deathbed repentance, and yet apparently gets the same reward as someone who has lived a lifetime of devotion and piety. How would you feel if you were raised in an upright Christian family, attended church regularly, and had established an exemplary home in the community, holding down a regular job, paying your bills on time, only to find that some johnny-come-lately with a deathbed confession is welcomed into heaven with more rejoicing than you received?”

Indeed, why be good? It’s a question I hear frequently from both young people and older people. Goodness takes a lot of lumps, and that’s been true for a long time. Years ago, the German philosopher Nietzsche wrote, “No good deed goes unpunished.” It’s no wonder people ask, “Why be good? No one appreciates it anyway.” I believe it was Leo Durocher who said, “Nice guys finish last.” And John Barrymore said, “The good die young — because they see it’s no use living if you’ve got to be good.”

Why be good? Note the false assumptions at work here. In the case of the thief on the cross, we are assuming that he had more fun in life, got more satisfaction out of his life of crime, than someone else who lived a good and productive life. Why do we assume that doing wrong or leading a useless life is more fun and fulfilling than doing good or being faithful?

One of the most depressing books I’ve read in recent years was titled The Windsor Style. It was about the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and the kind of life they lived. The Duke of Windsor was the former King of England who gave up the throne to marry Wallis Warfield Simpson. In a conversation with a friend, the former King of England said, “You know what my

day was today? I got up late, and then I went with the Duchess and watched her buy a hat." It is a line that sums up better than any biography ever could the utter nothingness of their lives.

The Duchess said, "I would rather shop than eat," and her days were filled with high fashion fittings and having her hair done. The book overwhelms the reader with the details of a pampered life and ultimately presents the Duke and Duchess as two absurd and useless people, being stylish, endlessly stylish, because that was all they had — their style.

One of their servants, who had been with them for many years, described their declining years as spending quarrelsome evenings over a bottle of whiskey. They had nothing and no one. They were just two very lonely old people.

In the case of the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son, he was assuming that his younger brother was having a better time and was enjoying life more all the while he was away from home, wasting his life in loose living.

So too for us. We sometimes assume that being bad or living an evil or luxurious, lazy life is more fun and brings more satisfaction than doing good and having work to do which is fulfilling and productive. Is it really more enjoyable to live a useless life? Remember, the prodigal son ended up living among the pigs and was so hungry he would have gladly eaten the pigs' leftover food. It was then that he realized what a fool he was.

Before we go further, let's define what we mean and what Jesus meant by being "good." It is more than simply obeying the rules. People who are "righteous" are those who obey the rules but go no further. They take great satisfaction in keeping the letter of the law and are inclined to be very hard on those who do not. But they all too frequently do not extend themselves beyond what the law requires. They are not compassionate. They do not reach out. The righteous frequently become the self-righteous.

The priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan were sincerely righteous people, but they left a wounded stranger to die in a roadside ditch, passing by on the other side, because the law did not require them to care for him. To be good, on the other hand, is to act in response to what mercy, kindness, and justice require.

To be good is to be public-spirited, self-sacrificing, generous, other-directed, unselfish. To be good is to do more than the rules require.

Sometimes, good people are called "do-gooders," a term not usually intended to convey approval. Often, in their doing good, in their work for justice, they disturb the status quo, and most of us don't like that. In that sense, Nietzsche was right — no good deed goes unpunished. Society does often punish those who do good, who do the right thing, precisely because it upsets the usual order of things.

Fortunately, the human race, in its more enlightened moments, has thought better of the good than of the righteous. Most people, when they are reasonably free from insecurity and anxiety, tend to support the efforts of those who do good for its own sake alone, and many find themselves doing good not for any reward but because doing good is its own reward. It's being true to our basic nature.

After that short detour on a definition of goodness, let's return to the main road and the story of the prodigal son, or as it might better be called, the story of the loving, forgiving father.

Realizing that he has fouled up his life, the younger son decides to return home. As he begins the trip and on the way, he practices the speech he hopes will soften up his dad enough so that at least he won't slam the door in his face. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

However, his dad doesn't wait for his lost son to reach the door; he sees him coming home from a distance and runs to meet him. Before the returning son has time to even get the first words out, his dad throws his arms around him.

The boy is back. The lost has been found. That's all that matters. And the dad doesn't do what many of us might have been inclined to do. He doesn't say that he hopes his son has learned his lesson. He doesn't say, "Okay, you can come back, but there are going to be some rules." He doesn't say, "I hope now that your wild days are over and you're ready to settle down, and I want you to find some way to make it up to your mother, who has been worried sick all the time you've been gone."

He only says, "Bring him something to eat. Bring him some better clothes to wear." And then the dad calls all the household together with the neighbors for a big party.

When Jesus first told this story about the lost son, along with two other similar stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin, He was responding to the religious people who were critical of Him because He was spending too much time seeking out and being with the "lost" people in that society — the sinners, the outcasts, people who were considered by many to be of less value than the church-going stalwart citizens of the community.

The critics of Jesus assumed that some people in society, because they are lost, have little value, and it's a waste of time to try to find them or forgive them or be in any kind of relationship with them.

Thus, Jesus was presenting to the people of His time, and in our time, a radically new concept regarding the nature and love of God. This story, in addition to others, describes the forgiving love of God, which will not give up on anyone as lost.

The love of God as expressed in Jesus welcomes all people, no matter how lost or how worthless they might seem to themselves or to us. That's good news for all of us.

Let's be personal for a moment. Is there anyone here who has not felt lost at one time or another? We can be lost in so many ways. Sometimes we are lost in the fog of fear, anxiety, and worry, and we search desperately for a clear vision, for a way out. We can be lost in our desire for security. We can be lost in the jungles of passion, hatred, and vengeance. We can get lost in defeat and disappointment. We can get lost in our ambition to get ahead, and we sell our souls in the process.

In addition, the story invites us to rejoice along with God when the lost are found, no matter who they are. Remember, Jesus said, "There is joy before the angels of God in heaven over one sinner who repents."

And that's the lesson the older brother needed to learn. He couldn't understand why there should be celebrating, singing, dancing, and feasting simply because his irresponsible younger brother had returned home. He could have understood it if his brother were returning home as a hero. Then a party would be appropriate. He thought his dad was making a big mistake. He

should be more business-like, less sentimental, and not so forgiving of his younger son's mistakes.

The older brother also found it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the fact that someone could change, especially someone close to him like his little brother. Do you find yourself having the same problem?

As I said earlier in this sermon, the older brother also made a false assumption. He assumed that his younger brother, while away, squandering his inheritance and wasting his life, was having a better time and getting more satisfaction out of life than if he had stayed home.

The older brother also had another complaint. He said to his dad, "For all these years I have worked faithfully in the family business, but nobody ever gave a party for me. How come I am being neglected?"

But was he really? Note his dad's response. "Son, you are with me always, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was lost and has been found."

Also, consider this: just maybe, there was a bit of envy in the older brother. Maybe deep down, he wished he had the spirit to break away a bit, to kick up his heels, to take a risk.

But no matter. The important point that Jesus wants to make is that the father honors the older son who has worked faithfully as well as the younger son. Nothing has been taken from the older brother to be given to the younger brother. Why is it that when God is forgiving and loving to someone else, we don't like it? Life with God is not a pulley system so that when someone else goes up, we go down. God does not have a limited amount of love and forgiveness, so that when God forgives and loves someone we think less deserving, there is less love and forgiveness for us.

This is a story about the infinite love of God. God rejoices, and all creation with God when someone who has been lost is found and invites us to rejoice as well.

In this story, Jesus tells us that whether we run away or stay home, no matter in what way we are lost, God always wants to find us and welcome us home. Amen.