

IX Trinity 2021  
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish  
Father Craig Looney  
*1 Cor. 10.1-13 St. Luke 15.11-32*



Young son leaves home...takes up residence in a foreign country...spends all his money...gets desperate and takes a job he hates...decides things weren't so bad at home after all...to his surprise dad welcomes him home...all is forgiven. And everyone lives happily ever after.

The Lost Son is part three of a Trilogy that includes the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, which we heard about in Father Plimpton's sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity. Each part of the Trilogy has a common element...something valuable gets lost...then is found...and there is great rejoicing in finding that which was lost.

We love stories with happy endings. Dutch priest, Father Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), author of the book *Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, suggests The Lost Son is a story without a clear happy ending. According to Father Nouwen, it is a story Jesus intentionally left open-ended. We don't get a "happily ever after" ending.

While working in France, Father Nouwen was moved by a poster he saw...it was a copy of Rembrandt's painting *Return of the Prodigal Son*, which appears on the cover of his book and this morning's Order of Service. He was later able to spend time alone viewing the real painting at The Hermitage, in Soviet Union era Leningrad, through the efforts of a friend living there. The museum's Director of Restoration instructed the guard not to bother Father Noewen. Sometimes it does pay to know someone who knows someone...!

What do we see when we look at the painting? We see the young son kneeling at his father's feet, asking forgiveness for being such a reckless fool. We see his father place his hands on his young son's shoulder and back, tender acts of loving kindness, forgiveness, and welcoming. Standing nearby we see the older son, hands crossed, judging his younger brother. He refuses to even acknowledge him as his brother. He is openly critical of his father's compassion and when he speaks to his father calls his younger brother "your son"!

The older brother is the element in the story we tend to ignore. We identify more with his younger brother. We recognize our total dependence on God's compassion and mercy when we wander off and get lost. We identify with the father; we want to show the same kind of compassion and mercy God shows. We don't think much about the older son...perhaps we should.

The younger son began the process of getting lost when he decided to ask his father for his inheritance. It was a cruel and offensive action that said to his dad, "I'm treating you as if you are already dead!" He rejected his father's love and "sonship". His redemption began when he started the long journey home and was welcomed home into his father's loving arms. He then realized he never lost his father's love or "sonship."

When the older son sees his father welcome his younger brother home, he displays intense jealousy and anger. He wants his younger brother to stay dead. He rejects his father's love and "sonship". He walks away in disgust from the celebration his father has prepared in honor of his younger brother's return. The older brother is now the "Lost Son", even though he never left home.

The Story of the Lost Son is about loss and redemption...our loss and redemption...about God's wish to welcome us back home...even when we think we have messed our lives up so badly...even he can't reach us. It's a story about our capacity to reject God's forgiveness, love and compassion, when we choose to stay lost.

Our redemption begins when we come to our senses and like the younger son begin the long journey home to Abba...Papa...God. Our homecoming is the realization we can never lose God's love...we can never stop being his children...even when we behave badly.

We like stories with a happy ending...so does God! We have the chance to write the ending to this story. What choice will we make to ensure it has a happy ending?

