

## God's Unlosable Love

March 27, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

*Texts: Luke 14: 11-31*

### Reading - Luke 14: 11-31

I wonder how many of you know or listen to alt/indie/synth rock band The Killers? (Looking for some young parents/young adult love here? Anyone?) They've been around for almost 20 years, headlined Boston Calling in 2018. In 2020, they released a hard driving, lesser known single called "Fire in Bone" and it's based on the story I just read. Imagine lead singer Brandon Flowers belting out the lyrics to a jaunty two-note bass line, with a high-pitched synthesizer and descants echoing the song's title. It starts by naming a string of emotions:

*I felt cast out...eighty-sixed...darkness  
...no good. I felt lowdown. I felt alone.  
I felt unknown. I felt fire in bone.  
Wrongly accused and disowned  
I felt big time. I felt major league. I felt weird sin.  
I felt ripped off.... run down...wrung out.  
I felt empty. I felt unseen.*

The words seem to hold space for the experiences of both brothers! But then the music changes, lifts and brightens and the biblical reference grows clearer:

*When I came back empty-handed  
You were waiting in the road  
And you fell on my neck  
And you took me back home  
After all that I took from you  
After all that I put you through  
Here I am.*

From the King James Version: "But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

This is just one of a plethora of poetry, music and art that our story has inspired. Apparently, Shakespeare alludes to it more than any other parable! Indeed, the Parable of the Prodigal Son has to be one of the most relatable, provocative, and generative that Jesus taught, and to think it's still being picked up in 2020 but a bunch of rockers! Perhaps that's no surprise given where the story starts, with an act of youthful indiscretion and all that dissolute, loose or so-called "riotous living," as the King James version puts it. Yet there's so much more to it. The story moves from rebellion to repentance and return, to reunion and reconciliation, and then the resentment and recalcitrant refusal of the older brother! What we're usually left with, the takeaway, if you will, is a shining portrait of the prodigal father whose abundant grace and forgiveness offers a memorable illustration of God's love. The twist

hinges on two definitions of prodigal - with invoking a reckless wastefulness, as with the son's behaviors, but, the second meaning an extravagant abundance or generosity, as with the father's love and hospitality! Of course, the good news of the father's gesture is that no one is beyond redemption or reconciliation. God is always waiting in the road, always ready to fall on our necks with compassion and love and delight, always ready to hear if not say: Here I Am.

There's *a lot* to unpack here, and as the song I opened with demonstrates, the story conjures a wide range of feelings. For today, and in keeping with our Lenten theme, *Jesus Our Center*, let's focus in on the profound sense of loss that's evident in this passage, and see what holding this relatable and human experience in the light of God's extravagant love might reveal for us. I start here because as we are living through these times we are all holding immense degrees of loss! The incalculable loss of human life and loved ones, now nearly 1 million in the US, and well over 6 million worldwide. Loss of connection and community, though gratefully some of that is returning! Loss of feelings of safety and security as a democracy and world order teeters. On top of all that, there is a perhaps overdue loss of ignorance and innocence for many as we reckon with racial and other forms of inequality. In our story too, the theme is carried in a myriad of ways. The rebel son loses his inheritance and then seems to lose himself, before he "came to himself" in vs 17! The father loses his son! And the older brother misses out as well. He loses the chance to experience that joy-filled banquet and to taste the fatted calf! What's more, this story follows the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. In fact, it's better known in some churches as the parable of the lost son.

Methodist minister Steve Garnaas-Holmes wrote a poem about this passage that can help us peel back its many layers. He begins with this powerful line: "God is not bound by our shame."

Let's pause right there. What an intro and what a gift, if not a release? God is not bound by our shame! For what an awful thing to be lost in shame, even for a short time. We've all been there, whether for a foot in mouth moment, or maybe for an entire season. Take this one we are enduring together, where it can sometimes feel that we are unwittingly or even unconsciously living in a mist or cloud of ambiguous shame. We may feel a shame for getting sick or staying well, for being numb or over-reactive, for feeling depressed or joyful, for feeling like we should be doing, feeling, being, living somehow differently than we are when the fact is we don't know what to do or say or how to act or react! These feelings may constrict us but gratefully God is not bound by our shame, not for a day and not for a season! Amen? Can you feel a loosening already? And that's just the first line.

The poem continues:

*The robe and ring (you remember what the father gave the son)  
The robe and ring are not merely gifts:  
they signify family. Belonging.  
You can't unbelong from God's family,  
can't be outside God's intimate bond.  
You always belong, always have, always will.*

What a tremendous message for this moment, and one that speaks directly to those different senses of loss or being lost! To realize no matter how lost we feel, we've already been found by God, have never been lost, nor are those loved ones we are missing, nor is that sense of safety or security! Ultimately, we

can't be outside God's bond, nor outside of God's love or protection! As the John Greenleaf Whittier line puts it: love can never lose its own!

The poem goes on:

*Run away; you are still God's beloved child.  
Come crawling back, poor of all but guilt;  
you are still rich with God's delight.  
Delight, child. Beyond mere acceptance,  
deeper than forgiveness: God's utter delight—  
reason for singing and dancing.  
You belong, sealed, to God's delight—  
compassion, healing, gratitude and delight.*

And now we are really getting somewhere. You see when we identify too closely to all those feelings of either of the sons, when we forget that human experiences of shame and loss are not ends but means, and that they can be great teachers, we miss one of the true gifts of this passage. That it's ultimately about our drawing ever nearer to that banquet of welcome, belonging, delight that God has waiting for us, on every road, at every turn. Despite our weird sins, despite our low-down and dragged out feelings. Despite our getting lost in those darkest valleys of doom scrolling, or of distraction, or in the tumultuous waves of our fears, anxieties and feeling of emptiness, no matter how wasteful or misguided we've become, God's compassion is always ready to fall on our necks in love and to pull us back, and draw us in, to our truest selves, back to our truest home, and with a banquet of love to boot!

We can't escape this fierce belonging if we tired and it ultimately leads us back to joy, especially when we get there together! When we can remember that we can simultaneously make room to hold and honor whatever pain and grief and loss and yet not be overcome by it. We lose ourselves and others if only to open ourselves to the deep rest and even the joy of learning and knowing that nothing is ever truly lost in those far reaching and welcoming arms of God's love. In this way, joy and delight can be measure of our acceptance of loss and even finitude. Joy is the capacity for a self-forgetting, grudge-forgetting, anxiety-forgetting, utterly generous embrace of a given moment that is ever seeking to embrace us back, that is ever inviting that most simple and honest of exchanges: Here I Am!

I wonder if Cory Booker had something like all this in mind this week when he addressed the Honorable Ketanji Brown Jackson at the hearing this week. Did you hear his emotional speech to her? If not, be sure to find it online and watch it in full! Booker repeatedly said a version of "I won't let them steal my joy!" In an act of solidarity with Jackson, he connected with her, at a soul level, and spoke of rejoicing at her presence and the pending confirmation. He told her "You earned it. You are worthy. God has got you!" This was more than an antidote to derisive, divisive, demeaning and dog-whistling inquisition she was enduring. It was so much better than a polarizing reaction. It was a moment in the sun above the fray, a banquet of belonging, a feast of love for Jackson and Booker, and their peers, and the black janitors who clean the Senate halls at night, and all of their ancestors to share, and no one was going to take that moment of joy, and pride, and love away! They couldn't lose it if they tried! Those deemed unwelcome and unworthy by patriarchal powers that be, of course they are worthy, of course they belong! And of course, God has got you Judge and soon to be Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson!

The pastor's poem ends with some provocative instruction that I hope we can all take in, if only because it offers an unusual spin:

Repent, he writes...

Repent of refusing God's delight.

Your penance, hard as it is, is to come in and feast.

Your penance is to enter into God's love and joy.

Yes! Yes! A thousand times Yes! Imagine Cory Booker or Kentanji Brown Jackson saying that to the haters! Imagine Biden and Zelenksy and the people of Ukraine saying that to Putin! 'Repent of refusing God's delight, refusing it to others, refusing it to yourself! You think power and money and yachts and lavish prodigal spending are what it's about? Man, you have no idea! Just wait for the lonely hangover in store, wait for that moment of being lost in your shame and wait for your penance ...for refusing God's delight!' And the same can surely be said of us too, times when we have felt lost, frozen, afraid and unable to accept the clear and ready path to God's joy?!

Thinking about Booker's line I wonder if in the end heart of the parable is something like this: Despite humanity's best efforts to the contrary, we cannot steal God's joy! And should we be surprised when we look at the extravagant wonders of creation, at the abundant depth and glory of human resilience, at the overflowing beauty we find in art and song and human communities like this one! This doesn't mean we can't imagine God feeling all the feelings right there with us - that is what the Psalms are about, that is what the Cross is about. But despite unspeakable violence, unfathomable greed and hatred, despite war, despite climate catastrophes, we cannot take away God's joy! We cannot take away God's delight!

God's love never loses its own, which means we can never unbelong! We can never stray too far nor be too stubborn! No matter how tired, weary, heartbroken, angry, no matter how embarrassed or ashamed of our ignorance or our actions or inaction, no matter how grief stricken, scared, doubtful, cynical, or numb we are, no matter how lost we feel, God will always always be waiting, always be ready to hear and to say. Here I Am! I'm right here, and no one can steal my joy or delight, for I delight in you, and you and you and even you! Amen.