

Sermon: Between Lost and Found

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, March 27, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A Spanish story, published in October of 1992, tells of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. After months of fruitless search, and in a last ditch attempt to reach his son, the father placed an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: 'Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.' Anyone care to guess what happened? On that particular Saturday, 800 men showed up at the designated location, of various age, all named Paco. All looking for forgiveness and love from their long estranged fathers.

That story struck a cord in me, not that I am estranged from my own father. Far from it. After the period of my youthful indiscretion, my father and I now have a very good relationship. But that Spanish story shook me in realizing how many people are in fact lost to their own fathers, and are longing to be found.

The Gospel reading today, contains also a story of lost and found, a story told by Jesus—the Parable of the Prodigal Sons. Note the plural use of 'sons', as there are indeed, not one, but two lost sons.

The lostness of the young son is evident. He is not entitled to any inheritance while his father is still alive and well. Nevertheless, he wants to experience life, to explore the world, to stake out his own future on his own term. So he puts forward this outrageous demand, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'

Instead of rejecting such a disrespectful demand, or perhaps giving this wayward son a strong rebuke, the father complies and divides his property between his two sons. Sure enough, as the story goes, the younger son takes his inheritance and goes off to a foreign land, where he squanders what he has in dissolute living.

Hard time falls in that land, and he finds himself in dire need, so he hires himself out, as sort of a voluntary slave, and begins to work in a field, feeding pigs. Note in the Jewish culture, pigs are considered to be defiled; raising and consuming pork is strictly forbidden. So for a Jew, finding

oneself working in a foreign land, tending to pigs would be considered as falling on real hard time, poetic justice for certain almost akin to a divine punishment. Even worse, he is hungry, and no one cares enough to provide him with anything. His hunger drives him to the point that he is now considering eating food meant for the pigs. The lostness of this young son is complete.

The journey to his found-ness, or his eventual reconciliation begins at that low point, at the realization of his own transgression. So he repents. He thinks to return to his father, begging to be received, not as a son (as he realizes that he is no longer entitled) but simply as another hired hand, for he reasons that he would still be much better off than where he is currently. He has this speech all drawn up in his head, and probably practices repeatedly on his way back home, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

As this wayward son gets closer to his former home, he looks up, sees his father running towards him, arms extending and smile radiating. The father closes the distance between them in record time, embraces him, kisses him. So this lost son blurts out what he has been thinking and practicing, “Father, I have sinned...” But before he is able to catch a breath to continue, his father interrupts him, and says to the others servants, “*Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*” (Luke 15:22-24) And they began to celebrate. What a beautiful story of a lost son now found, a broken relationship now mended. A wonderful story of a repenting son, a forgiving father, and they live happily ever after.

Yet, the story doesn't end there. Jesus continues and focuses our attention on the elder son. The one that stayed behind but is equally lost. The good son who didn't run off with his half of the inheritance. The one who worked like a willing slave for his father, the one who had never disobeyed. The one who felt under-appreciated as the father had never once given him a reason or the means for any celebration. This elder son returns home after a long day of work, and witnesses a banquet, of people dancing and singing, a celebration put together by the father, for his long

lost younger son. And the older son is angry, bewildered, and lost just the same.

It is interesting to note that when Jesus told this parable, in Luke 15, he did so in the context of a dispute, where the Pharisees and the scribes were complaining about Jesus welcoming sinners and tax collectors, and eating with them. Given such a context, we can begin to understand the wayward son as the sinners, as those who have strayed from the covenantal relationship with God, or those who were never in it, in the first place. Whereas the elder son who stayed represents those who do enjoy that covenantal relationship, those who are privileged as God's chosen people.

So when facing such a hostile and lost older son, who vehemently complains of the extraordinary generosity of the father in welcoming back long lost younger son, the father then said to him, almost repeating what he said earlier: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:32).

The story ends there, open ended. We are not told of the reaction nor the action of that older brother following, because we are meant to fill in the blank with our own action and reaction. The true recipient of this Parable of the Prodigal Sons is us, the religious authority, the community of faith that profess Jesus as the Christ, as the Saviour, as the Lord. How would we act towards those less deserving (at least less deserving in our mind) of God's generosity? How would we react in the face of the grace of God?

For the past thirty years, the one single overriding issue that has gripped our denomination, is PCC's treatment of those, in our own community of faith, who are of the LGBTQ+ sexual orientations.

The traditional and biblical interpretation has equated those orientations as sinful, and those practicing such lifestyles as sinners. Yet the national church had supposedly, as early as 1994, repented of its homophobia and hypocrisy, and understood the church as 'called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supporting community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported' (A&P 1994, pp.251-274, 56).

Nevertheless, the Church Law did not permit those practicing the LGBTQ+ lifestyles to be ordained nor permitted to be married. For as long as I could recall, the true practice within PCC seems to be that of 'don't ask and don't tell'.

For the past thirty years, the national church and the General Assemblies have studied, debated, passed resolutions, and issued statements on this topic. Finally, at the June 2021 General Assembly, an opening up in the doctrinal understanding of the PCC would be decided, once and for all. I won't saddle you with all the intricacies of the Barrier Act, and the two remits, but I do want to highlight the report from the Rainbow Communion, title "*Not All Are Welcome: A Call to Confession and Healing for Harm Done*".

From 2017 to 2021, the Rainbow Communion was commissioned to 'listen', to hear stories from those who have been harmed by the PCC's stance. The final report draws on the 139 stories shared and organized in various categories. Allow me to share a few quotes with you today:

"Though you've done everything possible to make this a safe space for me, as far as I'm concerned, there's no safe place in the PCC."

"Gay issues remain hidden in our church. No one talks about it. Families struggle in silence. Leaders do not speak to help them"

"I did not come out for fear that my father's career as a PCC minister would be jeopardized."

"I started to develop a deep sense of shame and guilt... and spent most of Sundays during my teenage years blasting loud rock music on my 'Walkman' in the back stairwell after the church service just so I could avoid interacting with anyone and feel worse about myself."

"I feel as though I abandon my God if I leave. If I stay, I feel as if I abandon myself."

"My friend was an educator in the PCC and in the closet her whole life. That secrecy led to her suicide."

Not all experiences shared were negative. Here are some positive quotes:

“When I came out to my minister, he said to me, ‘Well, I think you should just come along to church on Sunday and be among those who love you’.”

“Having a lesbian couple be married at our church let me know that it was a safe space.”

“It has suddenly occurred to me that queerness has shaped my ministry... to be gentler, not judgemental. Being queer is a gift. A way to see the world.”

“In responding to a parent who was troubled that their daughter came out, I replied, ‘Don’t worry about her salvation; it’s in God’s hands. Just love her’.”

There are a lot more, gripping, horrifying, heart-breaking, and sometimes hopeful stories contained in that report. When it was finally received on the virtual floor of the General Assembly, it was as if the Spirit of God was breathing through that virtual auditorium. Hearts melted, organized resistance crumpled, the Church Law finally changed, and grace of God permeates.

Don’t get me wrong, there is still a lot more work to be done, and we as a denomination is still in that space, that I would call: between lost and found. But I trust the Triune God journeys here with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.