

Where do you find yourself in this story? Have you ever been lost? Of course you have, we all have, physically as well as spiritually or psychologically. The path of life is rarely clear or straight-forward. We find ourselves lost in a Dark Wood not knowing which way to go, we've made a bad mistake or wrong choice or perhaps wandered from the path we thought we were on. If only someone would issue a printed itinerary to help us navigate all the twists and turns in our lives! Instead, we come to dead ends or are forced to make unexpected turns and we start feeling lost. *What do I do now, God, we ask. Where should I go?*

Feeling lost, being lost can be frightening and sometimes dangerous. But as we have discovered with times of uncertainty and temptation in our lives, being lost can be another gift of the Dark Wood where we gain understanding of who we truly are and how we are called to live in relationship with God and one another.

In Jesus' parable about a man who had two sons, I think that each of these three persons are lost in different ways and illustrate both the challenge and the gift of being lost. One gift is that when we are lost, we begin to pay more attention than we usually do to everything going on within us and around us. The Spirit invites us to be still and alert, with our senses wide open.

The younger son in this parable doesn't start paying close attention until he is completely lost and destitute. After rejecting his father, he wanders like a stranger in a strange land, prodigal or recklessly wasteful of his inheritance. He hits rock bottom, when he ends up feeding pigs for a Gentile farmer and desperately wanting to eat their pods.

But, we are told, *when he came to himself*—what an intriguing phrase!—when he comes to himself, when he starts paying closer attention to where he is and what he's become, he remembers his father and home, he remembers where he came from.

Oh, the path where the Spirit is directing him will be difficult, but he focuses on a plan: *I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him,*" words of repentance and humility. We don't know how sincere he is, because he is desperate for food. He does recognize, however, that he can't go back as a son; he will return offering himself as a hired hand.

It is hard to imagine how this son's heart could fail to be deeply touched and changed by the astounding welcome he receives. His father runs with abandon to greet him, which meant at that time hoisting up his robe and exposing his bare legs to all the neighbors, a disgraceful act for this well-respected landowner; then he compounds the shame by hugging and kissing his disreputable son, for all to see! These are the moments, I hope, when the younger son truly comes to himself and feels deeply the words of repentance that he speaks. His senses must be on overload; thunderstruck, as he experiences an incredible shift, a great turning-- no longer dead, but alive again; no longer lost, but indeed found, welcomed and loved as a precious son. When we are lost, we start paying closer attention to the signs of the Spirit pointing us in the direction of home. What a wondrous gift!

Another gift of being is asking for help and receiving support and guidance. When the younger son becomes desperately lost, he realizes that he must return home and ask for help from his father. His elder brother who stays at home, is also lost, but he struggles with admitting it and putting himself in the vulnerable position of asking for help or support.

This joyful homecoming pushes him over the edge, and he explodes with all the anger that has been building up against his father and his life. The elder son has worked extremely hard to live what he has been taught is a righteous life. But there has been no love or joy in his work. He is lost, because the passion and aliveness of his soul have been buried under layers of obligations and expectations. He has lost connection with his deepest self. Being lost can include feeling alienated from people and from what's going on around us, feeling, misunderstand, unappreciated, or abandoned. The heart of the elder brother is filled with resentment and bitterness.

Did he ever consider asking his father to give him a young goat so that he could celebrate with his friends? Asking for support or help is risky; it makes us vulnerable to being mocked, hurt, rejected.

It is not surprising that many who hear this parable identify the most with the elder brother. We work hard to live good lives, and so we understand his anger—it's not fair! Why him and not me? Isn't his brother the kind of person who should stay lost, who doesn't deserve to be found or welcomed with love? And so the elder brother stands outside the house, lost in his resentment and bitterness, but not yet ready to admit it, not yet ready to recognize that asking for help and receiving support and guidance are indeed gifts of the Dark Wood.

A third gift of being lost is the empathy and compassion we gain, the opening of our hearts toward others who are lost. The father knows something about feeling lost, because his younger son has rejected him and his elder son remains aloof and distant. We can imagine this parent sitting in an empty bedroom, expecting never to see his younger son again, lost in grief but also looking out the window, waiting and hoping.

And when he sees his son returning home hungry and destitute, his heart overflows with compassion, not anger. At the center of this parable is the prodigal father, prodigal--lavish in giving, recklessly wasteful, if indeed giving love is ever wasteful. He stuns everyone as he dramatically demonstrates God's extravagant, unreasonable, forgiving, wild love that cannot be contained .

And so the whole community is invited to a joyful feast in celebration of this homecoming and the relationship restored between a human father and his son, between God and a child of God. What a gift it is to receive empathy and unconditional love from someone willing to walk with us in the Dark Wood! And what a gift it is when we respond with compassion to another person who is lost, because of our own experience and understanding of what it feels like to be lost and to be loved—and because this is our call from God.

For the father responds to the anger of his elder son—and God responds to all our questions with these words: *Child, you are always with me, all that is mine is yours, but we had to celebrate and*

rejoice because this kin of yours was dead and has come to life, was lost and has been found.. There is only abundance and forgiveness when it comes to love, which is to be extravagantly offered to everyone, no matter the cost or the outcome.

The end of this parable is not an end but an opening as Jesus leaves the door wide open for all who find themselves lost in the Dark Wood. Will the elder son stay lost or will he step inside where he will be welcomed and loved, where he too will experience the joy of being found and coming to life again, together with his brother and his father, in celebration with the whole beloved community of God?

How about the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus tells this parable?

How about all of us? Are you willing to discover and receive these gifts of being lost? Let us enter together into the celebration of community restored. Let us open our hearts and share the feast to which God in Christ invites us, the God of amazing grace who always welcomes us home.

SOURCES

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