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**Sermon -- The Prodigal Son
St. John's Lutheran Church
Atlanta, GA**

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So I told him – look dad – I am suffocating here! Really, I mean it. You're killing me – this place is killing me. I can't breath. You don't get it- you don't get me. I'm not like you or my brother. I can't stay for one more minute. I don't want to be a farmer. That's your thing – not mine. Yep I told him- just like that. I said – I'm tired of you telling me what to do and how to do it. I've got to spread my wings- see the world – have some fun- make my own decisions- my own mistakes. I've got to get out of here! And I left. – just like that. I was gone.

And yeah it was cool for while- my pockets were full. I spent my money whenever and however I wanted to and I had a bunch of friends. Not sure where they are now though...

I could use a friend right now. We ate and drank – and made merry – you know what I mean? But one day I woke up and it was gone – all of it – the food, the wine, the women and the friends – the friends were long gone.

I'm just not sure how it happened. I don't know how I ended up in this place. I'm broke – man totally broke. I'm hungry and lonely and I have no idea what to do. Look at this place. It's a pig sty –literally dude – it's a pig sty. It's disgusting. I'm miserable. I screwed up – I did I screwed up and I don't know where else to go.

(Choir sings "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child"- verse 1)

All my life I've worked hard – been the dutiful son - the good son. I do whatever is asked of me – I get up early – I'm the first one in the fields every day -and the last one to turn in each night. I've earned my right to this land – and I deserve his respect – I do, don't I? I don't know what more I could have done – but for what? What was the point of all of this? He doesn't even seem to care – He doesn't appreciate me. He doesn't get it – doesn't get me at all. How could he just shove me aside after all I've done? It's not fair. Maybe I don't belong here and if not here – I can't even imagine where? This is all I know – all I've ever known and I don't know where else to go.

(Choir sings Motherless Child – verse 2)

For most folks this parable- known as the Prodigal son- the Lost Son or the Lost and Found son - for most folks this is THE parable- the best known- the most treasured -this story of a dysfunctional family – a turn of phrase I've always found a bit redundant – and in this case anachronistic too! – this story speaks powerfully to us about fear and isolation, redemption and love, envy and regret, hope and salvation. It is about being human- so very human – and the risk it is to love and be loved.

We are drawn into this story – because it is our story. We are the sons and daughters who long to find their way in the world. We are the lost ones. We are lost. We are.

In some ways it is a stage of life thing- in my work as a campus pastor I've noticed that for many young adults the transition after graduation is often a difficult one- a life longed for – of freedom and autonomy is almost never exactly how it is imagined. Friends scatter, work feels like work – way too soon and your parent's place is not quite home anymore and your place is not quite home yet. And it hurts a little – easy to feel lost in that – because the thing you've planned for all your life is finally here – so now what?

But is not JUST a stage of life thing – it is easy enough to loose your way at any point in the journey. We never stop longing to belong – to fit in – to be accepted. And we never stop longing to forge our own

path – declare our individuality and stake a self-reliant claim. And for most of us both of those yearnings live side by side in us – the desire to belong AND the desire to be unique - the desire to be accepted AND the desire to be self-reliant. Not opposites – definitely not mutually exclusive but sometimes hard to manage – making the dance of life - well a dance.

So we get lost from time to time – we do. We get caught up in thinking that it's all up to us to make the way and we get lost.

We get seduced by stuff – bigger, better, shinier stuff whether we can afford it or not and instead of filling up a hole – it makes one bigger and wider than we could ever imagine and we get lost. Same goes for food, alcohol, sex – maybe even work – insert your poison here...

Desperate to belong we point fingers at others and draw lines in the sand – as much to keep us in as it is to keep them out. We judge one another for being too different or not different enough and we get lost in our own hypocrisy.

Because we are so sure that we are the ones in charge – that is up to us to get it right. That we deserve everything we have and everything we want to have – we ignore the needs of others. We talk about the value of hard work and an education – like it's our right and not a privilege. We fool ourselves into thinking the world would be a different place if everyone would just pull themselves up by their bootstraps and we get lost in our apathy.

In the past I've been critical of the metaphor of home for congregations wary of the warm and fuzzification of God – wary of churches as the place we go to feel good about ourselves and I think you too might see the danger in this – Communities of faith are called to agents of transformation –working for justice comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. But I am increasingly convicted by the truth – that in good Lutheran tradition - both can be true. And now more than ever we who are lost are in need of a place to call home. We who are sometimes quite literally exhausted by the work of making our own way are in need of a people we can call home. Because if Robert Frost was right and home is the place where they have to take you in – then this is home. Sisters and brothers welcome home. That is what awaits us – each time we drag or skip or limp through those doors – we are welcomed home. Unworthy, or self-righteous, hopeful or dejected – ready to confess – determined to deny- no matter. The table is set with the finest linens, the candles are lit – the music is full of life, the feast is prepared and all will be fed. The one who loves us and claims us for her own – the one who calls us son and daughter, beloved child this one eagerly awaits our return and with arms wide open we are welcomed home.

Some of us may feel lost in this very moment, certainly others of us will feel lost again. But we are not alone. We are part of this amazingly beautiful and painfully flawed body of Christ. We are drawn together by the power of God's love –made new in God's forgiveness – we who are lost will always be found because God is God day in and day out God is God from ever-lasting to ever-lasting. God is God welcoming us home.