

This sermon was presented by the pastor from a brief outline and not from written manuscript. It was transcribed from audiotape and edited by individuals other than the pastor, who claims authorship. Said pastor did not necessarily read this transcript before publication.

March 11, 2012



ADD TO THE COMMUNITY

Jim Gates, Associate Pastor

We are continuing our year-long series that we are calling “PRAXIS, The Experiment.” There are five particular practices we are asking you to engage in. Those are in the acronym PRAXIS: to Pray for the entire world, to Read through the entire word, to Add to the community, to Invest in the kingdom, and to Send yourself to the nations. We are on the last of those practices. We didn’t go through it in order. So we are in the last of those practices, which is Add To The Community. So we are going to be thinking about that theme throughout this Lent.

This morning our Old Testament reading comes from the prophet Hosea. Hosea is a really interesting prophet. He is called one of the Minor Prophets only because his book is a little bit shorter, not because he is insignificant. Hosea is used by God in some interesting

ways. All the prophets are prophets because God speaks through them to the people. That's what it means to be a prophet: to speak on God's behalf to God's people. But many of the prophets are used to speak on God's behalf, not just with their words, but also with their lives. So Hosea's life, like the lives of many prophets, becomes almost a drama or a play that is acted out in front of the Israelites so that they might know who God is and what his heart for them is like.

Hosea also uses a metaphor that is common in Scripture: it's the metaphor of God's relationship with his people being like a marriage relationship where God is the husband and Israel is the wife. We see that again in the New Testament where it talks about Christ and then the church being the bride of Christ.

But in Hosea that metaphor is a little different. In the very first chapter of Hosea, God comes to the prophet and says, "Go and take a wife of unfaithfulness--" essentially, "Go take a prostitute as a wife." Hosea marries a woman named Gomer, and they have children together. And each one of those children God gives a special name that relates to his relationship with his people. God says, "I claimed you though you were unfaithful; I made you mine and yet you left me." And so Gomer leaves Hosea; she abandons him. Then God sends Hosea back to this wife who has abandoned him for another lover. We pick up in the 3rd chapter in the prophet Hosea.

Hosea 3

The Lord said to me again, 'Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.' So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine. And I said to her, 'You must remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you.' For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterwards the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.

I must say as an aside that there are times that I'm really grateful that I'm a pastor and not a prophet. Those guys really had it kind of rough, and one of these days we are going to preach a sermon on the evils of raisin cakes, but not this morning.

Our New Testament comes from the Gospel of Luke, the 15th chapter. This is a really familiar chapter and so I'm going to ask as you hear this chapter that you try to hear it fresh. This is the chapter we often call the lost chapter where there are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and lost son. As we read these stories, I'm going to suggest to you in a little bit that if you are like me you have probably misread this chapter, especially the final story about the lost son. You've probably profoundly misread that. At least I have for years and years and so listen very carefully to this very familiar passage and then we will talk more.

Luke 15

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not

light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, '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.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "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!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "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." '

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I have to begin this morning by expressing my gratitude to a group of young men who did a really kind thing for me yesterday. I didn't really understand what they were doing at first but I think it was good hearted.

If you are not aware, yesterday was the Duke - UNC basketball game. This is the second year in a row that the final game of the season, the Duke - UNC game landed on a Saturday when I was going to preach the following day. Last year and this year those guys got together and they did something really kind for me. They played so badly that I didn't have to watch the second half of the game, and it gave me the opportunity to be more spiritual and to really focus on my sermon. So I'm really grateful for that. I'm also really grateful for all of you who got on my Facebook wall last night and shared your love for me and shared your excitement about just good things in my life and what was going on. So I am just really feeling grateful this morning, so thank you for that.

I want to begin this morning by sharing a poem with you and I'm not really a poetry guy. I was an English major. So, I felt like I should like poetry more than I ever really did. But, every now and then,

there is a poem that kind of grabs me and this is one of those poems. It's by a guy named Francis Thompson, it was written in 1893 and it's called *The Hound of Heaven*. It's a great, great poem; it's been incredibly influential in the lives of many people. It's a long poem, I can't read you the whole thing, but I want to share with you the very first part of this poem.

*I fled from him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled from him, down the arches of the years;
I fled from Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, under running laughter.
And up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
And those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
With unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic and instancy,
Beat – and a Voice that beat
More instant than the Feet saying-
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'*

It's a beautiful poem and there is that refrain that comes again and again in the poem, the *Feet that followed, followed after. With unhurrying chase, And unperturbed pace, Deliberate speed, majestic and instancy*, feet follow after this man.

The poem is Francis's story of his conversion experience. He did not grow up a Christian and his experience is that God sort of hounded after him. That's where he gets the *Hound of Heaven*. Throughout the poem you get this sense of just the seeking, the seeking, the seeking of God after him all the time. It's a beautiful image, and I want to ask you to sort of hold that image in your head this morning as we talk. I think it's going to be important for us.

I said earlier that this parable of what we call the prodigal son or the two brothers, or the lost son, is a parable that, if you are like me, we have often misunderstood. I want to tell you how I have always read that parable and it may sound familiar to you. This is how I always heard it: There was a man who had two sons, and the younger son went to the father and said, "Father, you are nothing but money to me, and when you die I'm going to get some money. If you were dead now, I could have that money and we could just not relate anymore. So how about you give me my inheritance, and you'll be dead to me, and I can be dead to you, and I'll go my own way." And the father gives the son what he asks for.

The son goes off into a distant country, and he squanders all that money on dissolute living. And then he begins to be hungry because there is a famine and all his money is gone. The son comes to himself and he realizes what he has done with his life. He begins to have remorse and to repent and he says, "I'm going to go back to my father and *and I will say to him, '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.'*" So the son, desiring to be reconciled to his father and filled with remorse and repentance, goes back and his father meets him on his way. The son just begins to get those words of repentance out and the father immediately responds with this just overwhelming grace and welcomes him back home as his son. It's a great, great story. It's the way I have always heard that parable.

There are two problems with that story. The first problem is that it's really in contradiction to the two parables that come before it: the parable of the sheep and of the coin, and we will talk about it in a minute. But the bigger problem is, I would suggest to you, that that's a great story, but it's not a Christian story. That's a great story but it's not a Christian story. If we were Jewish or we were Muslim, that would be a really perfect story for our faith. I don't think it works for us as Christians.

You see, I think for us as Christians, central to our faith, central to our understanding of who we are and what it means to be Christian is

this idea that Jesus became human and died for us and that all of that happened while we were yet sinners. Jesus didn't wait until we repented to give his life. He didn't wait until we came to him to atone for our sins, but all of that happens before we come to know him.

We see that lived out really clearly in those first two parables. In the parable of the sheep that are lost, the man has one hundred sheep, he loses one, he leaves the 99, he goes and he finds the one sheep that is missing, he brings it back, he throws a party. And then it says, "In the same way in Heaven there is rejoicing over one sinner who repents."

We see that with the woman and the lost coin. She has 10 coins. She loses one. She sweeps the house, she finds it, then she throws a party with all her friends. And in the same way *there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*

Here's the key: repentance is critical but the repentance always comes *after* God has sought us out. That the repentance always comes *after* God has sought us out. You don't imagine that the sheep as it's wandering from the folds says, "Geez, I really made some mistakes, and I repent, and I want to go back to God the Shepherd."

When the coin repents from being lost and wants to go back to the woman. The repentance happens, but it happens *after* that party, *after* that experience of the grace of God.

So I want to retell the parable of the prodigal in a little different way – in the way that I think we are supposed to hear it. The beginning of the story is exactly the same. There is a man who has two sons. One son goes to the father and says, "Father, you are nothing but money to me. When you die I'll get some money. I kind of wish you were dead now. If you'd just give me the money we could go our separate ways." The father gives him what he asks. The son goes, he squanders his money. He begins to be hungry. He begins to be poor, and in the midst of his depravity and in his deprivation he comes to himself.

That phrase in Luke in that parable where it says, "*when he came to himself*," is a phrase that shows up in other places in the New Testament. One place it shows up is in the Book of Acts. There is a story where Peter has been arrested for proclaiming his faith. While he is in prison, an angel comes and escorts Peter out of the prison. It says that Peter is almost in a dream world, he is not sure if what he is seeing is really happening or not. Then, when the angel gets him outside of the prison, the Bible says, "He came to himself," the same Greek words that are used in this parable.

Now Peter doesn't repent of being rescued by the angel. It's talking about a self-awareness. He begins to understand where he is and what is going on. That's what happens to this young man. It's not that he repents. He begins to be self-aware. He begins to realize there is a way out of his predicament and he is motivated very clearly not by repentance. By what is he motivated? It's by hunger. It says so clearly he is hungry, he wants food. So what does he decide to do? He decides to go back to his father. Whatever words he is going to say about sinning, his goal is to get food. His goal is essentially to get more money. This is not a story of the great repentance of his life change. This is the same self-centeredness that he has lived out his whole life.

Incidentally, as an aside, there is a story of a young man who goes to college. In the first few months he is at college, he sends letters back to his father. He writes, "Dad, college is so great. Let me tell you all of these stories of what's happening." At the end of every one of those stories at some point he says, "Dad, I could use a little bit more money, can you help me out?" And, as the son is at college longer and longer, those letters get shorter and shorter. But the sort of particulars stay the same until, finally, the father receives a letter from his son in college that says, "No mon, no fun, your son." To which the father sends a letter back, "So sad, too bad, your dad."

That's sort of the situation. I mean he wants more money. So, he goes back to his father, and he begins to spin this spiel of repentance

-and maybe on some level it's true. But the father has been seeking him. The father meets him while he is still far off, like the shepherd looking for his sheep, like the woman looking for the coin. The father has been seeking his son. When he finds him, he interrupts all this babble about what the son wants, and he make him his son again. He responds with this extravagant, unexpected, overwhelming, undeserving love and grace. And it's that experience of grace that leads the son to real repentance. It's that experience of grace that brings him in to the party, into the kingdom of God. This is critical for us because this is how our God works. He seeks us out. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And He gives us this overwhelming, unexpected, extravagant, undeserved grace, and that is what leads us to repentance.

You begin to see a little bit why the older son is so upset. The older son has a lot of reasons to be upset, incidentally. One of those reasons is that the son comes back and doesn't have to do anything to get back in his father's good graces. Perhaps if the younger son had come home and spent a couple of months at the gate of the house in sack cloth and ashes, fasting and weeping and apologizing, perhaps the older son would have felt differently. That's not how it works. The father meets him and immediately bestows this grace and love upon him beyond anything he could have expected or imagined.

When you tell the story of your experience with God, do you tell that story as you seeking God out or Him seeking you? In Luke 19:10 at the end of the story about Zacchaeus, Jesus says what amounts to his mission statement in the gospel of Luke. Jesus says, "The son of man came to seek out and to save those who are lost." That's the mission of Christ in this world. He came to seek out and to save those who are lost...those who are missing from his kingdom, from his love, from his grace.

What's your experience of God? What's your experience of that Hound of Heaven who pursued you, perhaps pursues you still "*with unhurrying chase, And unperturbed pace, Deliberate speed, majestic and instancy.*"

When people become members of our church I often get the privilege of sitting down with them at some point and asking them to share their story about how they came to know God, what their faith background is.

About a year and a half ago, I had the privilege of sitting down with a young Navy officer of whom I asked that same question. "How did you come to know Christ?"

She said, "Jim, it's an interesting story. I didn't grow up in the church, I didn't really have any faith whatsoever until college. When I got to college, I was really busy with ROTC and with my classes, and I had all this stuff going on. But I remember that just two weeks after I got to school, this guy came to my door. His name was Jeff. He was kind of a good-looking guy, and he was friendly and fun to talk to. I was like, 'This is a good thing.'

"And Jeff and I talked for a little while, and finally Jeff said, 'Hey are you interested in ever coming to this Bible study with me?' And I thought, 'Oh man! I thought this was a good thing. It's just about a Bible study.' 'No thanks, Jeff. That's neat, but that's not really for me, I don't really do that.' And Jeff said, 'Okay, I understand. Would it be okay if I ever came back just to see if you are interested again?' And just kind of to get rid of him at that point, I said, 'Okay, that's fine; I'm not going to come but that's fine.'"

So Jeff came back about a month later and then the month after that and then the month after that and the month after that, and in the midst of that other people started showing up in her life not related to Jeff. A guy named Simon who kept inviting her to come to different Christian things.

Finally after about five or six months, sometime near the end of her second semester of her freshman year, she got so fed up by being pursued by people that she just said, "Hey, Jeff." (By this point she had his phone number.) "Jeff, I'll come to your stupid Bible study,

I'm just going to come once. I just want to get it over with. I can say I did it, and we can get this thing over with."

So she went and she said, "You know, it actually wasn't so bad. And I went again and I went again. The summer came, and I went home. I came back my sophomore year, and I went again and again."

And sometime the second semester of her sophomore year she gave her life to Christ. And she said, "Jim, it was so weird. I just felt like God was hounding after me. Like he just wouldn't let me go."

I said, "Yeah, that's how it is. God hounds after us sometimes."

One of my favorite stories in the early church is a story about a man named Ambrose. Ambrose was a politician who lived late 300's early 400's AD in the Roman empire. He grew up in a Christian home. He was a catechumen, which meant he grew up in the faith. On some level he believed, but he never made the decision to be baptized. There were some theological reasons for that; but, basically, he hadn't gone all in.

Ambrose was governor over a region that included the city of Milan. The Bishop of Milan had just died, and there was a lot of conflict in that city. So Ambrose went to the church in that city as their governor essentially to tell them to calm down, to chill out, that everything was going to be okay, that they would get somebody new, and to just give it time. And so he's in this church giving this speech to people just encouraging them to be peaceful and to be good citizens.

In the midst of his speech, somebody in the back of the church started chanting, "Ambrose, Bishop! Ambrose, Bishop!" And then another voice chimed in and another and another, and pretty soon the whole church is chanting, "Ambrose, Bishop! Ambrose, Bishop!" They pretty much elected him on the spot to be bishop of that city.

Now there were two problems with this. The first problem was that since he wasn't baptized, he couldn't be bishop. The second problem was that he didn't have any desire in the world to be bishop. So, he

did what any rational person would have done, he ran away. He ran away to the country and hid with some wealthy friends.

But the people wouldn't give it up; they kept looking for him. No kidding, it got to the point where the Roman emperor had to issue an edict proclaiming him bishop and threatening dire retribution on anyone who kept him from getting to his new post. At that point, the folks who were hiding him or hosting him decided it wasn't worth it any more. They turned him over, and he was almost forcibly dragged to the baptismal pond and baptized. Eight days later he was anointed Bishop of Milan.

He ends up being one of the four most influential theologians of the Western Church. St. Ambrose. He transforms ???? But his story is a story so clearly that of God hounding after him.

What's your experience with God? What is your experience of being sought by God?

One of my favorite hymns is *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, and there is a line in it that says, "Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God, here to rescue me from danger interposed his precious blood." What's your story?

Then, I guess the next question for me is, "What does that seeking look like? Is there a way that we can be involved in that work of God who seeks?" There is a book called the *Outsider Interviews*. It's a good book. It's about a group of young 20-something, un-churched outsiders who are interviewed by Christians and asked to tell about their experience in the Church. I want to play just a little clip for you from one of those outsider interviews.

<Video clip>

Un-churched:

When people have talked to me about being saved or about trying to save me or whatever that all they do is preach to me. They never listen to my side of

things, and they just want to like shovel all these scriptures down my throat. That's what I feel like.

Since I was raised Jewish, I never understood where Jesus fit into Christianity. And I feel like when I go and I try to go to Church, instead of trying to explain to me what Jesus is and how he works in the whole system of things, it's just, "This is it and there is no other way."

Interviewer:

When Christians tend to evangelize or try to get someone saved, even if they don't do it in great ways, they tend to mean well. And in our world it's a loving thing. How do you feel, just in general, about someone trying to get you saved?

Clarissa (un-churched):

I feel like the only people who have really, ... I've had people like come to my door and give me a pamphlet. And I appreciate that more than when I would go to church with my stepdad and they would tell me that I lived my life horribly and that the devil is in me. Because that doesn't come across to me as love.

I guess I never had anybody ,truly... if they wanted to save me and me truly feel like they loved me.

<end video clip>

I suppose there is a right and a wrong way to be part of God's seeking. That story of Clarissa – that's the young woman you just heard – she has a fantastic story. Even there I think she tells us some stuff that is really helpful as we think about, not just being sought, but how we might be part of God's seeking. She suggests that we need to be listening as much as we are talking. She suggests that maybe when we talk, we have to explain things in a way that makes sense – to not use the coded language. And, she suggests that we have to feel loving.

But Clarissa talks also a lot in her interviews about being judged and feeling this overwhelming condemnation from the Church. She

shares in another place more of her story and why she has had that experience.

You see, when Clarissa was 23, she had probably the darkest period of her life. Her father passed away. After her father died she became addicted to alcohol and then to more serious narcotics. And then, in the midst of all those addictions and all that destruction, she had a relationship with a man for about a month. This would have been largely inconsequential in the larger scheme of her life except that she got pregnant.

So, she started talking to her friends who were Christian and non-Christian and asking them what she should do. Though she got a lot of advice, and all of her non-Christian friends and all of her Christian friends were consistent in saying she needed to keep this baby, she decided the best course of action for her was to have an abortion.

Clarissa shares that she had a friend who was a strong, strong Christian who was very, very clear from the get go what her opinions were on this issue. But this friend also said to her, "I will not abandon you. You know what I think; but, whatever happens, I will be there for you. I'm not going to disown you."

Clarissa ended up calling this friend. She was the only person Clarissa could get who would literally drive her to the clinic and drive her home. This friend was the shoulder that she cried on for three weeks afterwards. Clarissa goes on to say that friend is the only reason she remains open to Christ to this day--not a Christian, but open to Christ.

Gosh, I heard that story. I said, "I don't know if I could do that." Then, as I was reading this week the story of the prodigal son, something struck me that I guess I had never thought about before, ... something weird that I just have always read past and ignored.

This is a man who has two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to

me.” So the father divided his property between his two sons. Why did he do that? Why did the father divide his property? He didn’t have to divide his property. He knew his son. At the very least he knew from that question that his son wasn’t going to take what he was given and use it well. He had to know that all the money that his son was going to get was going to end up just leading his son into more and more darkness. Why did he do that?

Why did he equip him in that way? I don’t know that I know the answer. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I wonder if part of the reason is that the father in his own heart said, “No matter what else, I will not disown you even if you disown me. Even if you don’t want me to be your father anymore, you will always be my son. This inheritance, this will always be for you.” Maybe the father was already seeking the son even at that point, ...already seeking the son, already trying to overwhelm him with that extravagant, unexpected, undeserved love and grace. Maybe that is what Clarissa’s friend is trying to do, too.

How about you? How are you involved in the seeking? Whether it’s at the end of the process, the fun part, where the son comes home and the father gets to welcome him home and his life changes, or whether it’s the not as fun part where the son wants to go and the father says, “No matter what else, I will not disown you. I will keep seeking you out.” How are you involved in seeking?

There was a Barna statistic a number of years ago where a national survey among un-churched adults was done. They said that 25% of un-churched Americans would attend church if a friend ever took the time or made the effort to invite them. Think about that for a second. One quarter of all non-Christians in American said they would come to church if a friend took the time or made the effort to invite them. That’s extraordinary.

I’m thinking a lot about this parable. It’s a great story, but it doesn’t end on an up note. It’s kind of a downer of a parable. Because the end of the parable isn’t the party like the other two parables end

with. The end of the parable is the story of the older brother. The elder brother's story is hard. He comes in from the field where he has been working, and he finds out what is going on. He refuses to go into the party. Then his father comes out and begins to plead with him, to seek him, and he answers his father, "Listen, for all these years I have been working like a slave for you and I have never disobeyed your command. Yet you have never even given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But this son of yours comes back who has devoured your property with prostitutes, and you killed the fatted calf for him."

I read that story and I think, "Gosh, I'm really in danger of being that guy." I look at my life, and I think I try really hard to work for God. I fill up my time with church and thing, and I do Bible reading, and I go to worship, and I've taught youth, and I've taught Sunday school, and I do mission trips, and I do all this good stuff. I'm working really hard for God. I'm trying to do his stuff and keep this church going, and I think I'm trying really hard to obey His commands. I'm not doing a perfect job, but at least I know that's my goal. And I'm working at it, and I'm trying so hard to obey His commands – and the elder brother is doing the same thing, and I realize the elder brother is nowhere.

The elder brother has totally missed his father's heart. He doesn't understand what it's about. The elder brother ends up outside the party because he doesn't care about the things that his father cares about. The father didn't want the elder brother just to be working to keep the church stuff running. He didn't want the elder brother just trying to be a good person. He wanted him to be part of the search. He wanted him to be out there looking for his brother. He wanted him to be out there seeking as he was seeking. He wanted him to care about the same things that he cared about.

It's a hard story because, at the end of it, the younger brother is in the party and the older is outside – we might miss the Kingdom of Heaven just because we miss this one thing: our Father's heart for the lost.

It's a scary thing for me. I would suggest that perhaps the only way that we can avoid being the elder brother is to live into being the younger. The only way that we can avoid being the elder brother and be the younger is to recognize that we are not here because we are good people.

We are not here because we have it together or because at one point in our lives we came to ourselves and repented and came back and said, "Hey, I screwed up. Gee, if I can do it why can't he do it?" We are here because God sought us out.

We are here because "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," and that overwhelming, unexpected, underserved love of God came to us and led us to repentance. Not the other way around. We are here because we know that we are not good enough and yet God loves us anyway. If we really get that, if we really get the idea that God has sought us out, perhaps we will want to be part of the search, too. Perhaps we will want to be people who are out there with our God seeking out those who are missing and lost from his Kingdom.

So I want to end with the end of Francis Thompson's poem. It's a reminder of the way God sees him and his own unworthiness; and, it's a great reminder for me or what Christ has done for me. Listen to this:

*"Human love needs human meriting,
How hast thou merited--
Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?
Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee
Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms.
But just that thou might'st seek it in my arms.
All which thy child's mistake*

*Fancies as lost, I have stored for the at home;
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"*

*Halts by me that footfall;
Is my gloom, after all,
Only shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."*

Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we confess this day that we are so unworthy of your love. We are so thankful, Father, that you have sought us out and claimed us. We pray, Lord, that you would use us today to be part of the ongoing search for the missing of this world. We pray, Lord, that our hearts will be aligned to yours. We pray, Lord, that we would have the overwhelming privilege of sharing the good news that you love us and that while we were yet sinners, you died for us. We pray, Father, that we might be welcomed into that eternal celebration. We pray, Lord, that we might experience your hand outstretched caressingly to us today. *"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He Whom thou seekest!"*
Thanks be to you. Amen.