

Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

Sermon Title: "Lost Light. Found Light."

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Where do we place the emphasis? I know that this is a rather broad question with seemingly no specific subject. For in fact, the subject of this question can be many aspects of our lives and the world around. And for whichever aspect we are talking about, do we emphasize the good things or the challenging things? Do we focus on the negative or the positive? Questions like these are a few of the reasons why I love small, local newspapers like our very own Wiscasset Newspaper. The emphasis is not only on the struggles or on the negative news in our world, for they also value the importance of lifting up the good, the positive, that's going on in our communities. They still cherish the "feel good stories", the positive work around us, for there is a lot of that too and there is such an openness to sharing that aspect of our life together. And so, there is often a bigger emphasis on the positive. Now, we don't emphasize the positive to minimize the challenges, the struggles, the areas of injustice and sorrow in our world. For these are extremely real. As we all know, there is truth in the challenges, in the harder news that we see and yet there is truth in the joyful, in the positive realities of the world around us too that is so often forgotten or not emphasized in the same way. Both are aspects of our lives and are part of the world around us - we can't deny either and we must be aware of both. Still, where we place the emphasis has the ability to change who we are and who we will be. Where we focus changes how we act, how we feel, and how we move forward day by day. It doesn't necessarily change our circumstances or the circumstances around us, but it does change how we meet and overcome them.

The effects of where we place the emphasis is not only something that we see in news coverage, but it can also be found in our scripture - particularly in our reading this morning from the gospel of Luke. In fact, this effect is found not in the text of the story but in how we as a Christian people have come to refer to this story. Our reading this

morning is widely known and probably best known as the parable of the prodigal son. This title automatically emphasizes the role of the son in how we read the story. But, this is a title that Jesus did not give to his story. Jesus never called this the story of the prodigal son. This is not the title that the gospel writers gave this story. For the headings that we often see in scripture that set apart different chunks of writing, those headings came much later by folks who were translating and looking to share these important teachings of our faith with others. The headings, these titles for different sections of scripture, I would say, came for readability, to help us navigate the Bible, and to summarize a bit of what is to come. And it is in these headings that the emphasis on the prodigal son was initially placed. And, whether it was intentional or not, these headings have set the emphasis for how many of us have come to read and hear the story that we have before us this morning. We focus on the prodigal son.

I was reading a commentary on this lesson by Fred Craddock, a contributor for the Interpretation Bible Commentary series which is one of my favorite bible study resources, and I found myself immediately taken aback by the title he put on this passage. He did not call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son which I expected him to do. Rather, he called it the Parable of the Loving Father. I had never heard this reframing before. The emphasis in all my upbringing, when it came to this piece of scripture, had always been on the prodigal son returning – on his repentance as he came home. The emphasis too has been on his elder brother who was jealous and angry that his younger brother was being welcomed home in such a lavish display of hospitality, love, and care after such reckless behavior. When the emphasis is looking at the sons, the focal point of this parable, of this teaching story which Jesus used, become about us. It's then about our repentance, our acknowledgement of our shortcomings, our return from reckless ways, our longing for a full life with our God in it. It's about our inability at times to accept others home, accepting others into the life of the church, when we personally hold something against them. Again, the focus is on us – the children of God – and the focus is more on the negative – on the shortcomings, on the challenges.

But now, when we flip-the-script, as Craddock suggests, and we look at this as the parable of the loving father, the main emphasis of the story is about God's love and grace which welcomes us home - the emphasis becomes about the positive. The primary focus of the story becomes God's joy for those who return, a joy which does not negate the blessings, the love, the embrace of those who have journeyed with God from the beginning, but it is a joy that sees no hierarchy. For God's love is given with true equity, whether we have been the older son, toiling with God for many years, or the younger son returning home, there is an equal sharing in the grace of God. When we see this as the parable of the loving father, we find that the emphasis is on the love and grace of God, which embraces, surrounds, and holds us through all that life brings. A love and grace which sees no barriers, which sees no conditions, which plays no favorites, but it is there for each and all to receive and to be transformed by such wonderful gifts of our God. The emphasis becomes a lot more positive from the start.

Depending where we put the emphasis, it changes where we focus. Still, in the end, when we look at this parable and we see the loving father and the prodigal son, both are important. The return of a repentant son and the love of a perfect father are both of great significance when we hear this parable of love and grace. Yet, the emphasis that I believe Jesus intended was not to focus on the prodigal son, but to highlight the loving father, which we see when Jesus starts the story - he says, "There was a man who had two sons." It doesn't start off with "there was a son who wanted his inheritance", but "there was a man or there was a father". The emphasis from the very begin was placed on the father. And while it may seem like a subtle difference where the emphasis is place, when we focus first on the father, this story reminds us first and foremost of God's unconditional embrace, it tells us that God doesn't hold the past against us but celebrates the moments when we are found. The moments when we allow that love and grace to embrace us and to celebrate us, it reminds us of the broad nature of that love, for when we willingly welcome these great gifts into our lives, there is much for which to rejoice. It may be subtle, but when we focus on the positive first, the love of God first,

well, I think it changes how we read this story but also how we live our lives. For this is a powerful love.

Beloved People of God, may we strive to put more emphasis on the positive in our lives. Yes, it doesn't change the fact that we still face difficulties and that we still have challenges and sorrows. But, I don't know about you, when I am able to focus more on the positive, there seems to be more hope, more possibilities, more light in the world. Yes, we could emphasize the places where light has been lost in our lives, or we can emphasize the places where light has been found. For when we do, we find the life-giving path that I believe Jesus intends – a path that focuses not on our shortcomings but that covers them and focuses on the love of our God, which embraces us this day and every day. And for this, I say “Thanks be to God!” Amen.