

Looking for the Lost

Luke 15:1-32

Also Psalm 147:1-7; Isaiah 61:1-11; Titus 3:3-7

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for revealing Yourself in this scripture. Send Your Holy Spirit to us in this hour that all of us might see You more clearly. Soften our hearts that we may welcome You into our lives. And grant us the faith to believe in You. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Losing Things

This morning Jesus is telling us three charming stories about a frustration common to everyone – losing things. Have you ever lost a sheep? Neither have I, but I have often lost cows. I grew up on a dairy farm, and occasionally we would get a call, “Your cows are out again.” Sheep get lost because they aren’t very smart. Without the guidance of a shepherd they wander thoughtlessly and end up in a ditch or a thorn bush. Cows do not wander thoughtlessly. They know where they are going – to the neighbor’s cornfield. So we would pull on our work clothes and head out into the cold, dark night, and drive those ornery cows home.

Almost everyone recognizes himself in the second story about a lost coin. Ruth and I were embarrassed last week when we lost the key to our hotel room. Laura recounts in *The First Four Years of The Little House on the Prairie* books the panic that set in when she and Almanzo lost a \$300 check which represented almost all their money, and the intense relief when they found it. You might say, “It’s only money,” but we need money to buy food and shelter. Even if you lost only \$300 or your wallet or your wedding ring – material goods which can be replaced – these are very important material goods. You look energetically and persistently, and you are flooded with relief when you find them. You might even call your friends and joyfully announce the end of your distress.

I hope no one here recognizes herself in the last story about losing a son. Perhaps you got separated from your child once or twice. We did more than once, and that is frightening. But the son in the story was not briefly separated. This man rejected his family, seized his share of the family wealth, and disappeared, the text says “into a far country.” Not only did his family not know where he was, he also was lost from his community, from happiness – and from God. I know people who have indeed lost a child this way, and it is unbearably sad. I was at a prayer meeting once where we broke up into pairs to pray for personal needs. My partner said, through tears, “Pray for my boy.”

The Lost

Jesus never tells stories just to charm us, although Jesus does enjoy pleasing us. These stories were Jesus’ answer to the accusation of Pharisees and scribes who grumbled at the company Jesus was keeping. The Pharisees were the faithful believers of that day, and the scribes were the equivalent of a seminary professor. They were offended that Jesus hung out with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were greedy traitors who collected money for the hated Roman oppressors, and the sinners publicly violated the law of God. Pharisees and scribes were good people – the sort you want as neighbors and school teachers and members of your church. Tax collectors and sinners were bad people – the sort you want locked up and kept away from your children. These were not naughty citizens who skirted the law. They were allied with a hostile foreign government and were predators who preyed on vulnerable people. Jesus was not only mingling with the people you might meet on the street. He was also eating and drinking with awful people, whom you might never meet in the open.

You don’t have to be a preacher or theologian to see that by telling these stories Jesus was making a connection of tax collectors and sinners with the lost in the parables. Now if you think that the Pharisees and scribes would have accepted Jesus’ answer, you don’t fully understand what is going on here. For something to be lost, it must first belong. The sheep belonged in the sheepfold, the coin belonged with the other nine coins in the woman’s pocket, and the bad son belonged to his family. The reason the shepherd

sought the sheep is that it was *his* sheep, the reason that the woman sought the coin is that it was *her* coin. It might have been an ornery sheep, but it was his. It might have been an ugly coin, but it was hers. Could Jesus possibly be saying that tax collectors and sinners belong in the synagogue? Folks, this is horrible. Is Jesus hanging out with tax collectors and sinners in order to bring them to the synagogue? What is worse than Jesus eating and drinking with the scum of the earth, is the possibility that He might bring them in here with us.

Lost Son

Jesus warmed up his audience with two stories about lost objects. The truly heart-wrenching story is the one about a lost son. What can be worse than pouring out your life and love upon a little boy, only for him to despise you, rob you of your wealth, and disappear into ruin? I can still, after 40 years, hear the sobbing prayer of the man who was estranged from his son. A sheep and a coin can be replaced, but a son can never be replaced. You would do anything to bring back a lost son. Or would you? Even if he has become a very bad person? He behaved hatefully when he left, but he spent his half of the estate doing shameful things among awful people, and now he is awful, too. Come to think of it, he sounds as bad as tax collectors and sinners. Do you want him back? If he does come back, will you demand that he repay the wealth he squandered? Or at least apologize for the shame he has brought on the family? All things considered, is it better just to let him drift away permanently?

If tax collectors and sinners are the lost, and Jesus is the seeker, then God must be the father who welcomes the lost son. And this is the most repulsive part of the story, that God would not only tolerate, but actually welcome such a horrible person. It is so unjust, so immoral, so impure for a holy God to welcome or even tolerate wicked people like tax collectors and sinners. The only right and reasonable way for God to treat traitors and predators is to burn them in hell. If God welcomes such people, do we want to worship such a God? Surely this is *not* the God we have known and worshiped. If Jesus is suggesting that our God welcomes horrible people, Jesus is dreadfully wrong. This sounds like blasphemy, and a terrible danger to true religion. Such a teacher must be removed from the public so that He cannot gain a following.

Good Son

Did you notice that the third story has one other glaring difference from the first two? The lost sheep and the lost coin were sought by a determined person who left the sheepfold and her home to look for the lost. In the final story, there is an awful emptiness while the lost son squanders his inheritance. Nothing happens. No one looks for him. Did Jesus make a mistake when He told this story by leaving out a seeker? Let's think about it. Who could have searched for the lost son? Who was at home? The older son, of course. He was of the same flesh as his brother, and as the older he had a responsibility for his younger sibling. The good, dutiful, obedient son could have gone looking for his brother and begged him to return. But he was busy. He was tending the farm, making money, expanding the estate, toiling so much that he had no time for his friends – and certainly no time for a wild goose chase for the brother who robbed him and brought terrible shame upon the family. No, he was a good son, a very good son, who did all that was expected of him. He was not his brother's keeper, was he?

The mask comes off in the explosive final scene. The father spent his whole life longing for his lost son. Every day he looked down the road where he had last seen his beloved boy. He hoped against hope that he might see him again some day. And when that day came, he abandoned all modesty and raced down the road to meet his son. He was much less wealthy than before his son had run off with his inheritance, but the overjoyed father found the resources to hold the biggest party the family had ever seen. No expense was spared to celebrate the return of the lost son. The whole village came out for feasting, singing, and dancing. But one person did not sing, dance, or feast. One person was not overjoyed. The older son was angry, very angry, and humiliated that his father would behave so shamefully with the wicked son. The last scene shows the father persuading and pleading with his older son to come join the festivities, but then the story ends.

What will the older son do? Will he repent of his greed and hatred and join the party? Or will he become hardened in his sin and even turn against his father?

Now it all becomes clear. Jesus is the older son of His heavenly Father. Jesus is the older Son who left the sheepfold and went into the far country searching, searching for his lost brothers. Like the good shepherd who rushes out into the night, plunging through the briars, climbing the rocks, evading bandits to find his sheep – Jesus left heaven and plunged into a world full of murderers, fornicators, thieves, and idolators to find His brothers. The Pharisees and scribes are the older brothers in God's family. They are the good brother, the one who dutifully serves his father, steadily enlarges the estate, obeys all commands, and never brings shame on the family. The Pharisees and scribes should have been inviting, persuading, loving the tax collectors and sinners. They should have held lavish festivals to welcome tax collectors and sinners into their synagogue. But the Pharisees and scribes were the good, dutiful, obedient – greedy, hateful, murderous older brothers who would do anything to preserve their power, wealth, and honor. They might even turn against their father to do so.

Tax Collectors Today

The stories Jesus told resonate powerfully with us today, and not just because we lose things. Our world also has traitors and predators – people who should be locked up and kept away from our children. Scammer who rob elderly citizens of their retirement, traitors who compromise national security, terrorists, mass murderers, narcotic gangs, sex traffickers, people who kill babies – and the list goes on and on. These are awful people who do horrible things, and God has established civil government to protect its citizens from their predations. What does Jesus think of such people? Might they be lost?

Theologically alert people will recognize that it is illegitimate to classify unbelievers as lost. In order to be lost, you have to belong to something, and unbelievers have not belonged to God. Or have they? Scripture teaches us that God chose his people before He created the world. Unbelievers are not church members and (in most cases) are not former church members. God has not chosen all unbelievers to be part of His Kingdom. But He has chosen some. Just as the good shepherd went out into the wilderness searching for the lost sheep among all the other animals he saw, and just as the woman passed by all the other coins to get the one she lost, so Jesus travels among all people looking for those whom God has chosen.

Who are You?

Who are you? Perhaps you are the lost son. You came this morning, perhaps to please your parents or friends, perhaps as a cover for your wickedness, perhaps to buy off God. We all look real good here, but you know you cheated on your taxes, or your wife. You exploded in anger toward your children and lied to your boss. Someone may be an alcoholic or drug addict. You may be very lost and very afraid. Jesus is here to welcome you. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to you this week and this morning to find you and bring you here, and Jesus says, "Welcome brother! Come with Me. I'll help you abandon your sins. But first we celebrate!"

Perhaps you are an older son. You came this morning because it is your duty. You are a good, obedient son who never cheats or lies or gets drunk. You read the Bible and pray, tithe your income and never miss worship. You bask in your goodness and keep yourself clean from the impurities of the world. Jesus says, "Welcome brother! It's been a long time. You do a lot of things that make you look good, but I haven't seen you for a long time. Now come with me. Today and this week I have to look for a lot of lost people, and I want you to come with Me. But first we celebrate!"

Warning!

I have a warning for you. Do you want a healthy church? A church is spiritually healthy when Jesus is present, and Jesus is present as we read scripture, preach the gospel, pray, and observe the sacraments. This is the danger you face as your church becomes more healthy: the people Jesus is seeking begin to follow Him here. If the good people in your church repent of their hatefulness and begin seeking the lost,

you will find drug addicts, prostitutes, and other bad people coming to worship Jesus. Is that what you want? Or is that too dangerous for you?

I led the RUF ministry at Lehigh University for ten years, and I have many wonderful memories. I am proud of Seamas who did more than anyone else to build the ministry, Sarah who invented six of our programs, Peter who was our best president, and many others. But I am most proud of our ministry to Greg. On the last day of staff training one December, Rod Mays, the national leader of RUF, asked me if I had read the newspaper. Headlines everywhere blared out, "Lehigh student arrested for robbing a bank." Rod said, do you know this guy? Yes, he was in one of our Bible studies. He had developed a gambling addiction, owed a lot of money to people who would not be cheated, and decided the safest solution was to rob a bank, pay off the gang, and spend the night in the safety of a prison. I am so proud of Peter and all the RUF students who welcomed this sad man into our fellowship, and I am so grateful that God judged us worthy to minister Christ to a thief, addict, and criminal.

Ministry can be dangerous. You never know who might show up, and you never know how badly your reputation can get ruined. You may lose your friends and reputation even while remaining in your own home if they are offended by the people you welcome.

Conclusion

A lot of people claim to admire or even love Jesus, but they do not really want to be with Him. Jesus is out in the dark and dangerous places of this dead and dying world, looking for His lost younger brothers. Do you want to follow Jesus? The real Jesus, not a Hallmark caricature of Jesus? It's thrilling, but dangerous. You may discover yourself hanging out with truly bad people, but Jesus will be there with you. Your church may have truly disturbing people in it. Nice Christians will despise you. This is your warning.

But first we celebrate! This is the day when Jesus calls us into heaven, hears our sorrows, comforts us with His word, and feeds us His body and blood. We good, clean people were evil and filthy in God's sight, yet He left heaven and came looking for us. We spitefully used Jesus to make ourselves look good in the eyes of men, but God was not deceived. We spurned our heavenly bridegroom when he wooed us, but Jesus never gave up on us. Like a persistent shepherd or a love-sick suitor, Jesus pursued us until He found us and brought us home. Jesus cleaned off the pig manure in baptism, and daily gives us the water of life. Now we are safe with Jesus in the sheepfold, and today we celebrate!

Prayer

Our Father, when we hear this gospel our hearts are filled with love for You. We were more horrible, all of us, than the worst traitor or predator. We would have sent us to hell, and indeed that is what we deserved. But You loved us! Why? Why did You leave heaven and search for us? We love You, but our love for You is dim compared to Your love for us. Our love for You is daily polluted by sin, yet You never cease loving us. We are stunned that You love us at all, much less share Your body and blood with us.

Father, we confess that we are proud, selfish, and lazy toward Your lost children. On our own we will continue to construct a good appearance while we pursue our own comfort and praise. Have pity on us, dear God. Soften our hearts. Strengthen our faith. Open our ears to hear Your call to search for the lost in our communities. Grant us the joy of working by Your side as You find the lost and welcome them home. Give us courage to face the dangers and laugh in the face of rejection. Make our church a place of rejoicing as the lost find a true, safe, loving home. We beg of you in the name of Your dear Son, Our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ascription

To our divine Seeker,
to our pursuing Spirit,

and to our loving heavenly Father
Be all glory, praise, and blessing in heaven and on earth,
forever and ever. *Amen.*

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