

THE LOST AND FOUND DEPARTMENT

Luke 15:1-10

Have you ever lost something dear to you – something so precious that you would move heaven and earth to find it? Over the course of my lifetime, I have had several of these incidents one in particular goes back some years. It was early summer 1974 – I had just graduated college and was beginning my graduate program at SUNY – Albany. Our department planned a Saturday off-campus at a rustic mountain retreat – picture Log Cabins; hiking trails; winding rivers. It was the fall of the year, so the air was crisp, and we were surrounded by the many colors of the trees. Planned as a break from our studies, this day had a second purpose – the building of relationships. Amidst roasting hotdogs over an outdoor fireplace, making s'mores, and small talk, someone began an enthusiastic volleyball game. As the excited voices of the two teams became louder and louder, they also drew the attention of the rest of us chatting in groups. Several of us wandered over to the game cheering on the opposing teams. The teams, in turn, called us to join the game; which I did.

I was wearing my college class ring – with a beautiful star sapphire; and a garnet birthstone ring from my Papa which I treasured. My hands started to smart and swell a bit from returning serves and launching a few well-placed serves of my own; so, I removed the rings and placed them in my pocket. When I turned in for the night, I looked down on my hand noticing I had not put my rings back on. So, I dug deep in my jeans pocket and...you guessed it...my pockets were empty! A search of the volleyball court in twilight turned up nothing so I had to console myself with the fact that I would look again at daybreak. Morning dawned clear and bright – still no ring; I was heartbroken. To this day I keep hoping someone will comb the area with a metal detector; find both rings and post their pictures on Facebook!!

Fast forward to Pentecost Sunday 2018. This is the Sunday Vern and I visited Marquis for the first time to get a sense of your worship time and give you a sneak preview of your new pastor and spouse. I was dressed in red, of course, and was proudly wearing a family heirloom from Papa's side of the family – a late 1800's – mine cut trio of diamonds set in gold. Although not the oldest daughter, Mom had left me the ring in her will, and once I got over the shock receiving this treasure, I began to enjoy it immensely wearing it frequently as I did that Sunday morning. Upon returning home, the ring was put in its safe place as was my custom.

Three weeks later I was packing for Annual Conference, but when I reached for the ring. It. Was. Gone! GONE! I was beyond speechless trying to calm myself both by saying prayers telling myself not to worry; it HAD to be somewhere close by. When I came home from AC, you can bet your last penny that I searched high and low for the ring – but it was not to be found. My heart sank as I pictured myself having to tell my siblings I had lost the ring!! One of them was bound to notice that I wasn't wearing it any longer. I was just as scared to tell Vern! Months went by where I would periodically search for the ring without any luck. I prayed to God, I prayed to the Holy Spirit, I prayed to St. Jude (Patron saint of lost things,) and finally to St. Anthony – the patron saint of hopeless cases. I was feeling pretty hopeless, certain I would never again see or wear the ring.

Months turned into a year; then came the ice storm November 2018 and we lost our power for 4 days. Armed with oil lanterns and flashlights Vern and I bundled up to stay warm; digging out our woolies and turtlenecks. Vern was elbow deep in his shirt drawer when I heard him exclaim, “Well, lookee here! You will never guess what I just found!” Sure enough, his flashlight was beaming on the ring which in turn sparkled! I was so very relieved and more than a little incredulous! Apparently, the ring had caught on the edge of one of Vern’s more ragged turtlenecks nestled deep in the drawer. Needless to say, I was overjoyed. What had been lost was found.

Jesus used lost and found metaphors quite frequently in his teaching during his earthly ministry, and this morning’s text from the Gospel of Luke highlights his less well-known parables of the lost sheep and lost coin; which he tells just before the story of the Prodigal Son. While these stories seem to primarily be about persons who have strayed from the “fold,” they also tell us a great deal about God, particularly God’s nature to forgive and restore God’s people. The parable of the Shepherd leaving the 99 to go find the one is filled with imagery of God as the Shepherd who is willing to leave the entire herd because he is missing ONE sheep. One! And when finding his lost sheep there is cause for great celebration and he invites his friends and neighbors to party with him. Just so in heaven there will be more joy over the one who has turned back to God rather than 99 faithful. And there is a part of us that says, well that isn’t fair! Here I have been a faithful Christian my entire life and they there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one found person?

Actually, it is very fair. You see, God has sometimes been called the Hound of Heaven. “The Hound of Heaven” is a poem written by English poet Francis Thompson. The poem, describes a hound chasing a hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with an unhurrying and composed pace. Thompson uses the hound as a metaphor for God. God does the exact same thing - following the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. The fleeing soul seeks to hide itself, but God relentlessly follows after until the soul feels its pressure and finally will turn to God.

God does not want to lose a single one of his children. It is the lost one he pursues – he doesn’t need to worry about the 99 – God already has us and wants the family to be complete. Someone can come to God in their last breathing, living moments and they will receive the same reward as you and I. In Matthew 20:1–16, Jesus tells the parable of the laborers in the field where any “laborer” who accepts the invitation to the work in the vineyard (said by Jesus to represent the Kingdom of Heaven), no matter how late in the day, will receive an equal pay with those who have been working the longest. And you and I, in our finite and human minds struggle with this teaching because it just does not seem fair. Truthfully, I really think that once we are in God’s heavenly kingdom none of this will matter. And really, who are we to tell God how He should order His kingdom??

Woven in with the nature of God is the nature of the one that is lost. A lost sheep that is capable to bleat out in distress often will not do so, out of fear. Instead, it will curl up and lie down in the wild brush, hiding from predators. The sheep is immobilized, so the shepherd must bear its full weight to bring it home. Likewise, the lost coin, an inanimate object, is unable to call out or shine brightly to bring attention to itself. Its rescue is totally dependent upon the woman’s diligence.

In both cases the focus is on the lost, but one commentator I read made an interesting comment about who the lost really are. Do you think it is possible that someone can be fully involved in a church and still be just as lost as the one sheep in the parable, or the lost coin? I think Jesus makes this very point as he is addressing the religious leaders of his day – those who vehemently objected to the company Jesus kept – the riff raff Jesus spent his time with. The priests and scribes listening to Jesus are so blinded to by their rules and regulations they too are lost when Jesus presents to them new pictures of how the kingdom of God should look and be. Jesus understands that those on the fringe of the community are essential to what the community in all its fullness should be. Until they return, the community is incomplete. (Feasting on the Word, year C, volume 4, page 72)

So, again, who are the sinners – the lost? Jesus wraps up the parables by reinforcing the importance of saving one person who was lost- or as verse 10 reads: *“In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.”* The sinners in these parables are the ones who need repentance, the ones who need their minds changed. God rejoices when the religious leaders change their minds about who is in and who is out. The rejoicing happens when community is complete and there is no such category of the one and the ninety-nine. True repentance happens when our minds are changed to such a degree that we cannot see our community as whole until all are included, and none are ‘lost.’ (Feasting page 73)

Baptist preacher Tony Campolo has a great story of the lengths God will go to save a lost soul. Tony was getting ready to speak at a Pentecostal college when several of the faculty members invited him into a classroom to pray for him. Tony remembers, “Pentecostals seem to pray longer and with more energy than we Baptists do. These men laid their hands on my head and prayed long, and they prayed hard. One of the faculty members prayed at length about a particular man named Charlie Stoltzfus. That kind of ticked me off, and I thought to myself, *if you are going lean on my head and pray, the least you can do is pray for me.* He prayed on and on for this guy who was about to abandon his wife and three children. I can still hear him calling out, “Lord! Lord! Don’t let that man leave his wife and children. Send an angel to bring that man back to his family. Don’t let that family be destroyed! You know who I am talking about...Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives down the road about a mile on the right-hand side in a silver house trailer!”

Tony thought to himself, “God knows where he lives...What do you think God is doing, sitting up there in heaven saying, “Can you give me that address again”?”

In Tony’s voice, following the chapel talk, I got in my car and headed home. I was getting on the highway when I saw a young man hitchhiking on the side of the road. I picked him up. (I know you’re not supposed to, but I am a Baptist preacher and whenever I can get someone locked in to where I can preach to him. I do it.) As we pulled back on the highway, I introduced myself, “Hi, my name is Tony Campolo. What is your name?”

He said, “My name is Charlie Stoltzfus...!” I did not say a word. I drove down the turnpike, got off at the next exit, turned around, and headed back. When I did that, he looked at me and said, “Hey mister! Where are you taking me?”

I said, “I’m taking you HOME! He said, “Why?”

“Because you just left your wife and three children! Right?”

He said, “Right! Right!” He leaned against the passenger door the rest of the way, staring at me. I drove off the turnpike onto a side road – straight to his silver house trailer. When I pulled into the drive, he looked at me with astonishment and said, “How did you know I lived here?”

Tony said, “God told me!”

Well, I believe that God did tell me. I think God may have set up things like that, just for fun. I mean if you are God, you are probably having a pretty sad time of it looking down on all the things that are going on in the world. I can just picture God nudging St. Peter and saying, “Hey, Pete. Watch this!”

Tony told Charlie, “You get in that house trailer because I want to talk to you and your wife.” He ran into the mobile home ahead of me. I don’t know what he said to his wife, but when I got in the house trailer her eyes were as wide as saucers. I sat them down and said, “I am going to speak, and you are going to listen.”

Man, did they listen: And during the next hour, I led both of them into a personal relationship with Jesus. Today that guy is a Pentecostal preacher down South.

Friends, God is in the Lost and Found business. You and I need to sit up and take notice because you just never know when God might want to use you or me to help him carry home of one his lost sheep! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.