

“Lost and Found”
(Luke 15:1-10)

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We've all heard the story about getting lost, asking for directions, and being told that “you can't get there from here.” The Gospel story from Luke this morning is filled with the good news that no matter how lost you are, there IS a way home.

Most people say that they want sermons that relate to real life. Well, you've come to the right place this morning. Losing something, or some one, or being lost and needing to find directions, is something that we all can relate to. It may be as life-shaking as losing your ViSA card, or just losing a sock or a dime, losing something can tear up your day sometimes. One place to go to get lost is Washington D.C.--I know, I live there. I read a recommendation in the Post to go see the beautiful Franciscan church and monastery in Northeast Washington, and—sure enough—I got lost.

I may smile as I tell about it now but it's not at all humorous when it's happening to you. You can remember being lost when you were a child, and you know how fearful it can be. Being lost is anxiety producing at any age and at any level. In the greater Washington area you can go back to almost any old neighborhood you remember from childhood and find it's all changed. You may muse sadly that “things just aren't like they used to be.” Maybe they never were, but that doesn't necessarily take away the sense of something being lost in your life.

Our replacement mentality doesn't help. We live in an age where if some appliance is broken or, worst still, outmoded, we just throw it away and buy another one. You know what I'm talking about. The rapid pace of change, and dealing with loss, sometimes come close together for us.

There's something deeper when your sense of being lost has to do with wondering what's ahead for you in life. I'll never forget how profoundly lost I felt when I graduated from college, began to wonder about my childhood dream of being a lawyer, and then, wham, got drafted into the Army. I felt as if the bottom had dropped out of my world.

I tell that story, because how I dealt with that loss of direction in my life was to start going back to church services, even on Sunday nights and even on the hills of Korea. The experience of comfort and joy I felt then from going back to church is something that still helps me keep my bearings. Even when you just feel that your life is going around in circles you need a way to get your bearings.

My life story is nothing as dramatic as Joseph Newton's who was a slave-runner who came to his senses and wrote "Amazing Grace, I once was lost, but now am found" or of Paul's, who lays out his sins in today's letter to Timothy. But each of us has a story to tell, if we will.

We all have come here in the opening Sundays of September, a new academic season and a time for finding some refreshment in the rhythms of our lives. I hope that we come here looking for something, ready to explore if our church life will provide something of value for us in our life journey. Because—if we're human—we all have sometimes a sense of missing something, however comfortable and satisfied we may look like on the surface. At some points I think we all may be like the people in those TV cell-phone commercials—where people keep talking to each other before they realize that they've lost their wireless connection with each other!

Jesus is saying that God the Good Shepherd wants you back on the line—you're worth something—a lot—in God's eyes. That's at the heart of all the bible message, which the Gospel writer Luke distills into the two parables we heard just now and in the familiar one that we don't hear today—the parable of the lost prodigal son and his forgiving father.

These parable stories all speak to our human condition and they speak even more to the nature of God. God is first the shepherd who has brought his flock safely home but after counting his sheep realizes that one is still missing. So he goes searching high and low until he finds the one who is lost. He is so happy that he wants to share his joy with everyone.

In the second parable, Jesus is saying that God is like the woman who had ten silver coins and lost one. God cares enough and is persistent enough to do what the woman does—tearing the entire house upside down until she finds the coin that was lost. Then God is like that woman who invites all her friends to celebrate with her that what was lost has been recovered.

The truth is that God cares enough for us that he invests his very being into searching for us and restoring our relationship with him and with each other. And there is joy in heaven when that happens.

Let me focus on the last part: God invites us into his joy, to share his joy, to respond to God's joy. In John Newton's famous hymn, "Amazing Grace" remember there is a revealing line, "I once was lost but now am found." Newton at one time was a captain of a slave-bearing cargo ship between Africa and the new world. When he came to see the evil of slavery he felt dirty and corrupt for participating in the degradation of his fellow human beings. He looked upon this part of his life as being lost, and he spent the rest of his life trying to eradicate slavery. John Newton felt that he could not have discovered a better direction for his life, except for the amazing gift of God's grace, and he was moved by his joy in that, moved to give back to God and others something of the new life he had discovered.

Now you and I may not be in the same league of the great all-time sinners like Paul, who tells some of his sordid story in his epistle this morning, or like John Newton, but that is not a requirement for membership in St. James'. Whether we are willing to name it or not, we are all sinners, "all we like sheep have gone astray", we each have our own unworthiness and unresponsiveness to God's love. All of us should pray, if we will "Create a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

At whatever point God finds you this morning, so great is the mysterious love of God that we are never written off as totally lost or hopelessly irredeemable. God cares for us with the perseverance of a loving parent, carries us like a good shepherd, and loves us completely and unquestionably without limit or condition.

John Newton found his way to give back to God what he could by working for a free and better life for others. All of us can find our way to give back, to actually share in what God is doing for us in this wonderful community of St. James', to be part of, if you will, of God's search-and-rescue team here and wherever life takes you, and to want to share with others what you're discovering.

But first we have to recognize that God is always seeking us out and offering us new beginnings. As Moses and the Israelites discover in their Exodus experience, as the apostle Paul recounts his "lost and found" story in the letter to his brother Timothy, as the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin celebrate, the love of God is always there waiting for us. Even in our darkest days, even when our confusion and lack of connection from God and other people is the most acute, even when we are angriest at God and the things of God—he is searching for us, he is waiting for us.

For it is at those special points, we, the ones who know we are *lost*, are most likely to be found by a loving and forgiving God. And it is from that special point of recognition and joy can we turn around and give back that love and forgiveness to others.

What amazing grace! Thanks be to God! Amen!