



GOD'S LOST AND FOUND

Isaiah 49:1-6; Luke 15:1-10

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Every church I know has a lost and found. In my former congregation it was a table in the atrium near the library. On that table were all the items that have been forgotten, misplaced, or left behind. The table tells a story: a jacket tossed off on the playground when the wearer got too hot; a pair of reading glasses left in the pew after worship; an eighth-grade science book left by a student doing last-minute homework before youth group; a well-worn Bible misplaced after Bible study because the owner walked a friend to the car; and a collection of colorful umbrellas in all shapes and sizes. This week I went to see the lost and found at our church here. Cathy at the front desk told me to pick a drawer. I opened an overflowing drawer stuffed with scarves, necklaces, glasses, and an assortment of items. Guess what I found? The car keys I have been looking for since I lost them in the parking lot last summer.

If God had a lost and found, what would it look like? I suspect it would be a table piled high with many things: the long scar of a cancer patient that reflects sleepless nights and lost hopes; the wounded heart of a broken relationship; the empty bowl of a hungry child in a refugee camp; the broken spirit of a student scorned and bullied; the grocery cart that holds the possessions of a homeless woman facing winter without a place to live; the half-drained bottle of a man trying to medicate his depression with alcohol. The most numerous articles: the eyeglasses of all those people who can't see anymore where to turn, what to do, how to love, why to care, or when to give.

Yes, if God had a lost and found, it would be all these things and more. God is not content with letting things pile up. God is not satisfied when people are scattered, far away, broken, alienated, in trouble, wounded, or lost. God can't just let things be.

In Luke, Jesus tells a series of three parables about how God seeks the lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy. Today, we hear the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin; next week we will explore the parable of the lost son. Jesus tells these parables to the gathered crowds: the lost sinners who have come to listen and the righteous, grumbling Pharisees and Scribes who can't see just how lost they are. The righteous do not like the fact that Jesus surrounds himself with sinners. The righteous keepers of the law resent the kindness and compassion of God.

These parables teach us three things about the character of God. First, the parables tell us that God's heart breaks when we wander from God. We can be lost in so many ways. Our cruelty, self-preoccupation, bitter resentment, lust, self-righteousness, and vindictiveness can lead us down dark paths far from God. Sometimes, we think that who we are and what we do does not matter very much to God. How could God possibly care for me when I am only one of billions and the earth is less than a dot in the vast universe? We are led to wonder with the psalmist, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8).

The gospel song, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” was made famous by the singer Ethel Waters. The song was written in 1905 by Civilla Martin, the wife of a Disciples of Christ pastor. The Martins were visiting a couple named the Doolittle’s. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nearly twenty years. Her handicapped husband cared for her from his wheelchair. Despite their difficulties, the couple demonstrated a remarkably joyful spirit. One day Rev. Martin asked the Doolittles how they managed to have such a positive attitude. Mrs. Doolittle replied, “His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.” (“His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” *Wikipedia*).

If the shepherd cares for one lost sheep even though he has ninety-nine others, and the woman cares for the lost coin even though she has nine more, how much more God cares for you and me. You are of infinite worth to God. No matter how beaten down or broken we may be, no matter what others may say about us, no matter how many mistakes we have made or foolish things we have done, or no matter how far we have wandered, God’s love is there for us, searching us out.

A friend of mine is a successful salesman. He told me that he had grown up in a home where every word was a criticism that cut like a knife. At school, his senior English teacher told him that he would never amount to much so there was no point in applying to college. He applied anyway; he was accepted. To his own astonishment, he did well and finished with a degree in English. He said that so much of what he accomplished he did despite the negative messages he got from his family and from that teacher. What turned his life around was the experience of acceptance he found in a Christian student group. The group helped him see – for the first time in his life – that people cared about him and that he was a person of infinite worth to God.

The second thing the parables teach us is that God will go to any length to get us back. When the shepherd counts the sheep for the night, he finds that one sheep is lost. He leaves the 99 sheep in the wilderness to look for the one. He risks everything to find the lost sheep. It isn’t because that one sheep is more special than all the others. No. The only difference is that this one is lost. The shepherd looks *until* he finds the sheep. He is not going to turn back, give up, or quit until he finds the lost sheep. When he finds the sheep, he lays it across his shoulders and brings it home.

In the parable of the lost coin, notice how Jesus describes the effort of the woman to find the lost coin: she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches every nook and cranny until she finds it. The parables tell us that God is like that: God does not give up until the lost are found, the wounded healed, and the broken made whole. Gospel business is risky business.

In the prophet Isaiah, God’s servant is called to restore the lost tribes of Israel who are scattered among the nations. Then God says that simply bringing the Hebrew people home is not enough. The servant of God is to be a light to the nations so that God’s salvation might reach all people, even those who live at the ends of the earth. No one is beyond the reach of God’s love.

Yet, there are some among us today who may feel very far from God. For whatever reason, we have wandered far afield, and we don’t know how to get home. The Bible is the story not of our relentless pursuit of God, but of God’s relentless pursuit of us. Sometimes we don’t know what to say, how to make it right, or where to begin again. Sometimes all we need to do is let go of the worry that blocks our thinking, the frantic concern that causes our heart to beat out of control,

the despair that blinds us to see what is right before us, and take hold of the God whose hand is stretched out to us in Christ. God never gives up on us.

Finally, the parables show us the great joy that flows from the heart of God whenever the lost are found. It is a joy that cannot be contained, that overflows and spills out until the whole community is caught up in its power. When the lost sheep is found, the shepherd invites his friends and neighbors to celebrate. When the lost coin is found, the woman invites her friends and neighbors to celebrate. Whenever a life is changed, a human heart transformed, a sinner repents, the joy in God's heart flows out to all the angels in heaven and to all the saints on earth.

Joy is contagious. The business of the church is to see each human being as a person of infinite worth to God. The business of the church is to have the relentless determination to seek and find the lost. The business of the church is to welcome all with great joy into God's kingdom. One scholar has written that the joyful celebrations at the end of the parables are nothing less than "the feast of God's joy...in the midst of the hard daily grind (*The Parables of Jesus*, Luise Schottroff, p. 156)." It is a risky business. The church is called to risk for the sake of the joy before it.

What if we were to take all those things in God's lost and found and find the ones to whom they belong? A cancer survivor finds a life here among us that is not defined by disease, but by a new life in God; wounded hearts find a community in which their wounds are healed; the empty bowl of a hungry child is filled with food so she can go to school and learn; the broken spirit of a young student is mended through love and acceptance within the church; the homeless woman finds shelter for her children; the troubled man finds healing for his depression and addiction. All those people who had lost their eyeglasses find them and put them on again, so that here among us they may see which way to go, how to live, what it means to love, and why faith matter most of all.

On that day, the joy in heaven will overflow and spill out upon us all.

O praise this God who seeks and finds the lost!