

“Found By God’s Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church — Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 15: 1-10

When was the last time you lost something? Last week? Yesterday? This morning? It’s so easy to set something down in your house, in your car, in your office, and then you can spend hours searching for it later. The most common thing for me to do is to set something down, and then a magazine or paper gets placed over top of it. If you looked at my desk right now in my office, you might wonder how I could find anything. But let’s not judge, okay?

Of course, judging others is something I’m pretty good at when it comes to losing stuff. I will become frustrated with others that they could misplace something I gave them, or keys to the car, or someone can’t find their phone only to realize it was wrapped up in the bed sheets, which are in the washing machine. Love you, honey! But I’ve always felt that God has a great sense of humor and keeps us humble when we start to judge others. Some day last week, I got on a rant at our house when I laid out money on the dining room table for a music lesson, and then I didn’t see it the next day and no one knew where it was. I then cleaned up the table and upon picking up a piece of that day’s mail, saw the money laying right where I had laid it. And I then proceeded to contritely apologize to all in my family!

When was the last time you felt lost? On a trip to someplace new? On your way to a child’s game at a location you’ve never heard of? We used to always have paper maps in our cars to get us to a place that is unfamiliar to us. Now, we whip out our smartphones, type in an address, and they will give us directions to our final destination.

But feeling lost can be more than not knowing where we are physically going. We can also feel lost when everyone else’s expectations of us feel overwhelming. We can feel lost when we don’t know how to face a particularly challenging situation at work. We can feel lost when we see a loved one slipping more and more mentally, and we have no idea how to respond. When those kinds of situations find resolution, it is like we have been found after being lost in the woods for weeks.

To find something which was lost, or to be found after feeling lost yourself, it truly causes joy and thanksgiving. You want to share your good news with those around you. You want to tell strangers about your good fortune. You feel as if you have been granted an undeserved blessing, and promise not to take it for granted. Why? Because that something or someone who was lost was gone for good, as far as you

knew. But when that something or someone is found, a part of your life is restored to wholeness, and you rejoice.

It's no wonder, then, why it is easy for us to relate to these two parables of Jesus. Jesus tells us that just as a shepherd searches for the one lost sheep out of a hundred and finds it and rejoices, so too does God rejoice when just one sinner repents than a hundred righteous persons. Or that just as a woman searches for the coin she had lost in her house, and finally finds it and rejoices with her friends and neighbors, so too does God rejoice with all in heaven over the one man or woman who becomes a believer in the Lord. The lost soul, the rebellious child, the lifelong criminal or bad seed — these are the ones whom Jesus is saying the Lord rejoices over when they have been found by the gospel of love.

But who is in the audience that day? Who is Jesus speaking to? Helen Debevoise describes the scene that we have read from the Gospel of Luke: *The crowds are pressing in around Jesus to hear his teachings. All manner of people make up this community. They gather around Jesus for a variety of reasons: the disciples to receive instruction; the Pharisees and Sadducees to keep tabs on Jesus' radical teachings; and the people who do not really belong anywhere because they have lived so much of life on so many fringes. They are described as the tax collectors and sinners, which mean that they are the people no one else wants to hang around with . . . Somehow these outsiders have crowded into the community as well. This was a group of strange bedfellows, hardly a dinner list that anyone of any salt would put together. Here they are, eating with Jesus. If you are, after all, known by the company you keep, Jesus has completely thrown the community into a panic.*

The side conversations begin immediately . . . The whispering starts, "Who invited them? Why would Jesus embrace this woman, this man? Does he not know who they are, what they do for a living? Who is this Jesus? He talks of godly things on the one hand, and yet he eats with them on the other."

Perceiving the questions, Jesus begins to address the growing division in the crowd by talking about the nature of God in terms they can understand. He approaches it on economic terms, talking about things that they value. He wants them to think about what is most important to them. For example, the shepherd values the health and the safety of his flock, his source of income; the woman values the hard-earned money she has scraped and saved to feed her family . . . Think of that thing most precious in your life and what it would be like to lose it, whether through carelessness, or intent, or theft. Something on which you place extreme value goes missing. You would be devastated. Not that you cannot continue; you can. People adapt - but life is incomplete. Part of the whole is missing.

God is like the shepherd who values each sheep in the flock, like the woman who accounts for every silver coin in the purse. God treasures every child of the family. When one goes missing, God goes into search mode. God's nature is love, and love looks like one who goes out tirelessly searching, because the one who is lost is so lost that she cannot find her way back home. (Helen Montgomery Debevoise, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 68-70).

“The one who is lost is so lost that she cannot find her way back home.” That sentence describes how lost we can become in so many ways.

We become lost in partisanship and anger, unable to see the one we disagree with as a fellow brother or sister in Christ. We witness this on a societal level, with public rhetoric that turns acidic and divisive, and an inability to respectfully seek consensus even when there is disagreement. We witness this on a personal level, with individuals unable to reconcile past hurts or transgressions, and such anger consuming their outlook on the present and future.

We become lost in grief and sadness, unable to see how our future might exist without the one we have lost. We witness this in personal ways, when a spouse, family member, or friend dies, and individuals struggle to consider how their life could go on. We witness this in communal ways, as churches, organizations, or groups yearn for how things once were, becoming so stuck in their grief that they are unable to positively imagine their future.

We become lost in pettiness and self-centeredness, unable to see how we are intricately connected to those around us. We witness this in how we set our priorities, reacting incredulously when someone asks us to help with a project because we are so engrossed in our own activity. We witness this in how we set our values, blind to the reality that we are ruining our most treasured relationships when we become addicted to work, destructive habits, or unhealthy substances.

We are the lost sheep. We are the lost coin. We are the lost of this world. And we all yearn to be found by the persistent and loving owner.

Penny Nixon writes: *No one would dispute that at the core of each parable is a story of searching and finding; but what is the search for? The search is for something specific in this case: a wandering lamb, a lost coin. The joyful finding of the wandering one (is) a comforting message to those who have wandered afar, who feel lost and outside the care and even the reach of God. (A) God who will travel into the thicket to pull you out, the God who crawls into the hole you have dug for yourself and lift you up and out. Is it a search to save or a search to welcome? It is one thing to “save” and another to “welcome.” Religious insiders are often more comfortable with saving the lost than welcoming those whom they perceive to be lost. Saving is about power, whereas*

welcoming is about intimacy. Saving is primarily focused on the individual, whereas welcoming is focused on the community (G. Penny Nixon, *ibid*, 71).

Do we view our ministry at John Knox as searching out the lost and bringing them into a place of safety in the arms of the good shepherd? When a community group uses our facility for a support group meeting or children's activity, do we view it as rent that is paid, or do we view it as a means of embracing those who might feel lost and being welcomed by the shepherd's love? When a new family walks through our doors on a Sunday, do we view them as potential members who might add to our numbers, or do we view them as individuals seeking something which has been missing in their lives, and who are yearning to learn and belong? When we evaluate our programs, our budgets, our ministry as a congregation, are we more concerned about our own interests, or are we more concerned about how our time, talent, and treasure might help seek those who are lost and are yearning to be found by God's love in Jesus Christ?

When our focus is on welcoming the lost, we are all found by God's grace. When we change our minds about who is in and who is out, then we are all found by God's grace. When we rejoice when any who are lost - emotionally, physically, spiritually - are then restored to wholeness, then we are all found by God's grace. "When one in our community goes missing, we are all affected. When one is restored, we are all better off for it. That is how it is in the household of God" (Debevoise, *ibid*).

Thanks be to God that we have been found by God's grace.
Amen.