

Safekeeping

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Luke 15:1-10

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The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins^[a] and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

I certainly praise God for our worship gathering this day as concerns for this coronavirus sweeps our world and our nation. We are gathered here today because God always keeps watch over the flock and calls us to return time and gain to the flock. Even as we wander here and there, God always persists in seeking the lost and returning us to his care. Today, we are be found right here, right now as we hear once again these beloved parables. The process of being found by a persistent shepherd intent on keeping us safe.

We have all lost something one time or another. We know the panic, the ways that our brain races to reconfigure where we have been, retracing our steps to that precious item. I'm certain all of you have stories about losing something precious, the search and hopefully the finding! I too have many stories well I am afraid to admit. I have spent countless hours in the search for those precious items. Let me share!

My first story happened on a great day of outreach and celebration at church (of course). We were having a mission event where many items were brought in from other countries and locally to support small business and the sustaining of individuals livelihood. Items arrived at the church from Nicaragua and Israel and a few local no-profit agencies. The fellowship hall was filled with color and joy and energy!

During that same time, we were collecting winter coats for Seneca Street United Methodist Church for the approaching winter season. Those coats came in and were through checked for missing buttons and stray items left in pockets. A good friend delivered them the same day. I spent my morning overseeing the sale and cleaning out all the pockets of each coat. It was an amazing and exhausting day. As we began wrapping and packing up the unsold items to return to the organizations, I glanced down at my finger and noticed my diamond was missing from my engagement ring. My heart sunk and I truly grew light headed over the sense of loss. Not only was that diamond precious to me for obvious reasons, but that diamond had been in Peter's family for decades and had a wonderful story attached to it. Everyone was engaged in the hunt but it was to no avail. The diamond was lost! I imagined that someone at Seneca Street received an amazing gift in the pocket of their new to them coat. The next days weighed heavy on my heart yet I persisted, kept retracing my steps and searching. I heard countless stories of other lost jewelry and precious items that had been lost and found weeks later. The connecting thread of that treasure kept me searching. Days later, I was in a storage closet preparing for an art project that the children were to do on Sunday, when I glanced down once again and amidst the glitter and sequins from former art projects was a much larger glimmer. Yes, it was my diamond! I ran to the office to share my joy with our office manager and Peter. I could not believe after many days of searching I was blessed to have my treasure returned. The lost was found and believe me there was much rejoicing.

The second loss was surrounding a greater treasure. It went missing while we attended Camp Meeting at the Syracuse Carrier Dome over 35 years ago, yet this moment in time is vivid. Camp meeting was a wonderful 3 day event celebrating the camp meetings of old where folks gathered for worship, workshops, wonderful preaching and music concerts all celebrating God's love and call on our lives as uniquely United Methodist. Our son Thomas was about 4 and Aaron an infant. We were surround by friends and as we moved about during a break. It was hard to get through the corridors without stopping every few feet in the halls to greet an acquaintance we were just seeing for the first time. Book stores were opened (which is never a good thing for pastors) We either buy too many books, a third of which never get read or we just get lost in thought or caught in a title. As Peter and I perused the books during a break in the day, each in charge of a child, we realized in a moment's time that Tom was not with either of us. Panic ensued as we searched for our small child in a sea of people. I was sick with worry yet Peter reassured me he would be found! After enlisting friends and the security and what seemed like an hour but was more like 10 minutes, Tom came strolling towards us with a friendly hand guiding him back to the fold. As Tom was prone to do he had grown weary and impatient with our agenda and wandered off to find his own fun. We shared our joy of finding our son with our friends that had helped us search, thanked the security profusely and decided to return to home base to recover and let the kids play. My heart had had enough swings from panic to joy, from lost to found for one day!

Our scripture lessons recount 2 lost and found stories just like ones from my own life and possibly yours! The parables start with life as lived: a shepherd loses one of a flock of sheep; a woman loses one of her ten coins. Loss defined is as broad as its occurrences; unable to be found, not knowing where you are or how to get where you want to go. Unable to find your way, no longer held, owned or possessed.

What is described is not an act of repentance, but the absolute commitment of one to finding them again. Action verbs predominate for the shepherd and not the sheep; leave, go after, finds, lays it on his shoulders, rejoices, comes home and calls together his friends. The same hold for the woman: light a lamp, sweep the house, search carefully, finds and calls together her friends. The parallels show the emphasis is on the finding and the one committed to find the otherwise hapless lost sheep and passive coin. The time needed to search is important. Time needed to search, to figure things out. The state of being lost is an ambiguous determination in life. Things or people can literally be lost as the sheep and the coin. Misplaced, an item's value is suddenly at stake depending on the efforts to find it. Misdirected or misguided, being lost can result in being late or missing an appointment. In both, the searching for mislaid things and the shortened time of a planned event seems to mean wasted time. Sometimes the time it takes to find what you've lost seems like no time at all and other times the time seems excruciatingly long. Sometimes you feel the weight of the loss only when the search turns up empty handed or found. In that wasted searching, we however, take the time to see what we have been missing all along.

To complicate things further, prior to Jesus lost stories, we see the tax collectors and sinners who come to find Jesus. They draw near. They come to listen to Jesus. They come grumbling about Jesus' hospitality, that he not only welcomes sinners, but eats with them. "What a waste of time they are," I suppose the Pharisees and scribes saying. Jesus not only finds the lost, but then celebrates when they are found - spends time with them - valuable time.

Maybe the time lost in the searching is not wasted after all because it is that which defines the worth of the lost item or lost moment. The time searching is the time necessary to recalibrate meaning – the meaning of that which you have lost, the meaning of your own lostness. The finding of the treasure that is or that you are in the flock of God's relentless searching.

This is what our Lenten journey should be. We sit in this time of wilderness of lostness seeking to be found, to find, to be heard, to hear, to understand that we are holy vessels worthy of God's safekeeping and love. The joy in this season of Lent is that God is the relentless searcher.

This leads to the stunning conclusion in both parables; "there is more joy in heaven" and "joy in the presence of the angels of God. Lost coins nor lost sheep can repent because as Joseph Fitzmyer puts it, "repentance does not take place without the provenience and initiative of a gracious shepherd." God will always relentlessly seek and find.

Repentance is not free standing. Conversion is not just for some. Underlying them all is a prevenient mercy that just keeps searching... in the darndest places, for the darndest people. This

is not what the world would seek, but in God's kingdom the ground of repentance looks quite different. And in God's good time that joy will break out. That's how God feels anytime anyone is drawn back into relationship with God, or chooses life, or lives into his or her potential, or helps out another, and in all these ways is found. Joy - pure joy!

The Pharisees and scribes don't get that. They don't realize that God is primarily about love, rather than rules, and therefore about joy, rather than anger or fear or impatience. God will search relentlessly for the lost one.

This Lent I invite you to places of joy! The joy when one of God's children who have discovered the abundant life God hopes for us. I mean, these stories aren't only about a lost sheep or coin, not really. They're about a shepherd who risks everything to go look, and about a woman who sweeps all night long to find. These stories are about a God who will always go looking for God's lost children, even more fervently than I went looking for Tom. More than that, though, when you think how ordinary were the persons representing God – a shepherd who stands at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder in first-century Palestine, a woman with only ten silver coins to her name – you realize that maybe these aren't just metaphors, but rather that they are reminders that God often works through ordinary people to do the extraordinary work of helping to find someone.

On September 11, 2001 – Welles Crowther went to work like every other day to his job as an equities trader in the World Trade Center. After the second tower was hit, the one he was in, Welles led everyone he could find down the steps to safety, and then he went back for more. And after leading more people to safety, he went back again, and again, and again, until the tower collapsed. On that day, this talented, athletic, good natured, but in so many ways ordinary person did an extraordinary thing, giving his life to make sure others could live. On that day, God used Welles Crowther to find people who were lost.

I know we won't often find ourselves in those kinds of circumstances, yet God who has searched for a lost sheep like you and I might also use us to find others. Not only can God use us, but God does, and will. At work, at home, at school, through our congregations, in our places of volunteering! In the finding there will be great rejoicing! Thanks be to God! Amen.