

“God’s Lost and Found: The Parable of the Lost Coin”

Luke 15:1-10

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As we saw last week in our study of the Parable of the Lost Sheep, it’s a terrifying feeling to lose something which is so very important or meaningful to you- whether we’re talking about a wallet, a set of keys, or perhaps some precious heirloom that has been in the family for generations. It leaves you feeling helpless, exasperated, and foolish all at the same time. You find yourself returning to places you’ve checked three or four times already and even searching areas you weren’t in- you refuse to believe that something so important may be misplaced or WORSE, LOST FOR GOOD. Shortly before I left as pastor of Old First in Syracuse, NY to assume my new pastorate in Waterloo, Iowa, two friends from there bought me a round-trip ticket to London as a going away gift where we planned on spending a week together. The night before we were to drive to Kennedy Airport in New York City, Tom called me to make sure that I had my passport on hand. I assured him I knew exactly where it was and that I’d be ready and waiting when he and Terry pulled up the next morning to get me. After he hung up, I went to the small safe that had been built into the fireplace of my upstairs bedroom in my turn-of-the-century craftsman style home. It was where I kept such valuables as my birth certificate, the deed to my home, the bill of sale to my car, and of course my passport. As I opened the safe to retrieve it, I suddenly found myself panicked when I discovered it was not there as I had supposed. With my anxiety level increasing by the minute, I tore apart every room in the house but alas, without any luck- I knew that without that document, there was no way the airline would ever allow me to get on that plane. I virtually spent the ENTIRE NIGHT revisiting places I had searched over and over again, going through assorted bags and boxes and drawers until I painfully had to concede that I probably would not be joining them on our long-anticipated trip together.

At six the next morning, my friends arrived with Tom bounding through the front door with a loud, “Dave, let’s go! We can’t be late!” I then had to break to him the awful news I’d been dreading- that I couldn’t find my passport and it looked like they’d be going to England without me. Unwilling to take no for an answer, he said, “Let’s let a fresh set of eyes look for it.” The first place he visited was up in the attic where there was an assortment of travel bags stacked one on top of another. I said, “Tom, don’t even bother. I’ve been through them four times already.” Well, he continued ANYWAY and he didn’t just open each one up and take a cursory look inside, he had to twist each bag and crush it in his hands convinced that such things as money and jewelry and even passports often find their way into hidden pockets and compartments that eventually get forgotten about. Within a minute, he exclaimed, “David, I think I’ve got something here.” He then proceeded to unzip a secret pocket that had been built into the bottom lining of one of the bags, a soft valise I had used some months before on an overnight trip to Canada, and, like Harry Houdini, he extracted my U.S. Passport from it. The excitement and joy I felt in that moment was INDESCRIBABLE. In a matter of minutes, I went from being one of the most DESPONDENT persons on the planet to one of the HAPPIEST as something so important as my visa had been recovered just in the nick of time.

As I prefaced in LAST week's sermon here in Luke 15, all three parables related by Jesus involve something very precious that has been lost- in the first, it is a LOST SHEEP, in the second, a LOST COIN, and in the case of the third (which we'll begin looking at NEXT week), it is a LOST SON. You will notice, however, that in each of the parables, the objects lost are very different. In the story of the LOST SHEEP, it is really a parable about OURSELVES- it is when WE become the very thing that is lost and can't find our way back; in the SECOND, it concerns an object or thing WE have negligently lost (such as my passport) and can't rest until we DO locate it; and in the THIRD, in what is commonly referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it is about someone who has intentionally walked away from someone who loves him dearly--in this case the young man's father--with the result that he has now become a lost soul, losing his self-respect in the process. Although each involves a very different situation, all three stories share a great similarity in that when the person or object in question is once again found and reunited with its owner, there is then a great celebration held where much rejoicing takes place.

In this morning's parable, God is compared to a poor woman who goes to great lengths to find a lost coin. Because she is poor and a lost cent can often mean the difference between eating and going hungry, she sweeps every nook and cranny of her house until she recovers it. But notice there is a major difference between these first two parables. In the FORMER, the shepherd has lost something in the fields OUTSIDE the house where in the LATTER account, the woman has lost something INSIDE it. This is a significant point that Jesus is making here--one that would not have escaped those Pharisees. You see, the house in which the woman lives and has lost her coin is MORE than just the place she happens to reside in. It was a deliberate reference to the "house of Israel, the house of faith" which the Jews--God's covenant people--were confident they ALONE inhabited. By placing these two parables side-by-side, Jesus is creating a contrast between those who are OUTSIDE the house- that is, the shepherd and his sheep, and those who reside INSIDE it- the woman with her coin.

And WHO are those who reside OUTSIDE the "house of faith" but the GENTILES, the despised enemy of Judeans everywhere. Jesus is suggesting by the shepherd's relentless search for that lone lost sheep that God has a SIMILAR love and concern for the Gentiles, for all those OUTSIDE the house of Israel who may be lost, and that he will not stop until every last one has been found and brought safely home again. CONVERSELY, by having the woman search for her lost coin INSIDE the house, Jesus is saying that even the JEWS, even those who reside within the "house of faith" (and that includes the Pharisees and scribes here)- they can end up every bit as lost as the GENTILES are. However, the GOOD NEWS here is that as God will stop at nothing until THE VERY LAST GENTILE has been found and returned, so this SAME God will not rest until he has located and restored EVERY LAST JEW, EVERY LOST CHILD OF ABRAHAM. Therefore, by telling these two parables back-to-back, we see how God's love is no longer the special prerogative of just the JEW, but of ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE- both Jew AND Gentile, men AND women, young AND old, rich AND poor, Black AND White, Christian AND Muslim, gay AND straight, slave AND free! It was a message those exclusivistic, self-righteous Jews did not want to hear. Jesus seems to be saying that ALL people EVERYWHERE are lost at one time or another, but the GOOD news is that God is no respecter of persons and he will go to any length to make sure we ALL are found and brought into his

kingdom- so UNIVERSAL is his love and WITHOUT BORDERS OF ANY KIND is his concern.

But what does it MEAN to be lost- it can mean different things to different people. Some people become lost when, like the sheep in last week's message, they are lost by reason of ignorance and stupidity. As we all know, sheep are fairly dumb animals. With head down, they are so busy nibbling from one patch of grass to another that they lose all sense of their surroundings, so MUCH so that they don't even realize how far they've wandered far afield from the rest of the flock. Well people can behave just like sheep do. We can become SO THOUGHTLESSLY ABSORBED IN SOMETHING that we never stop to figure out where we are in relation to everybody else. For instance, people can be so absorbed with their JOBS that they can think of little else; work for them is 24/7. And so they wind up neglecting significant relationships whether it's with their spouses, their children, their friends, or even their God; relationships become ruptured and marriages get destroyed. Some people are so obsessed with ADVANCEMENT AND MAKING MONEY that they think nothing of abusing their co-workers and employees, and will walk over ANYONE in order to achieve their goals. Such people are not INTENTIONALLY mean or injurious- only that they're so fixated on their OWN pursuit of things that they forget what's TRULY important such as personal integrity and human relationships. When jobs and money and status and success become MORE IMPORTANT THAN HUMAN BEINGS, in Jesus's eyes, such persons are LOST. He said it best when he once asked, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul?"

Then there are some people who like the coin in this morning's parable become lost not by fault of their OWN but because of the negligence of OTHERS. That coin did not lose itself- it was lost because she was not paying attention and had become careless. We become lost in the same way due to no fault of our own- perhaps it is the result of our upbringing or our environment or due to certain social policies that disadvantage us or keep us down. A young girl is raised in a home where the father was continually abusive towards her and for the rest of her life, she must carry the emotional scars of that relationship. This was never her fault and yet she is forced to live with voices in her head telling her that she's worthless and no good and will never amount to anything in life. Thus, she becomes lost- looking for love and acceptance and often in all the wrong places. Our prisons and hospitals and asylums are FULL of persons such as these- people who are there due to somebody else's neglect, persons who are like lost coins. They may be the product of deep poverty or broken homes or long-time sexual abuse or constant bullying from their peers. This is ESPECIALLY the case with persons who are racially or ethnically profiled or harassed as well as those possessing a different sexual orientation. Yet the result tends to be THE SAME- due to all the abuse and mistreatment they've had to suffer throughout their lives, THEY'VE BECOME LOST and don't know what to do about it.

Then there are those who go astray, neither through ignorance such as the lost sheep nor through the fault of others as is the case of the lost coin, but with their eyes wide open and by their own deliberate choice as we will see next week with the YOUNGER SON in the story of the prodigal. He was a self-willed person who wanted to be FREE- FREE from all the order and routine of farm life; FREE to live life on HIS terms and not his Father's or ANYONE ELSE'S. He was typical of those who are always looking for a party, always wanting for a good time whether it is found in the bottom of a liquor bottle, the high from a mind-bending opiate, or the comfort of a

one-night stand. However, over time he begins to realize that freedom can become its OWN prison. Well the world is FULL of such people who one disastrous decision after another eventually find themselves lost, no longer remembering where home was for them.

Friends, if it is true, that at one time or another we ALL found ourselves lost, and maybe not once but MANY TIMES throughout our lives, then the way BACK begins by FIRST acknowledging how we HAVE lost our way and that we are POWERLESS to find our way home again using our own wits or resources. It begins by first recognizing our OWN HELPLESSNESS, our OWN INADEQUACY and then looking to the aid and assistance of the only one who CAN find us and safely lead us home- THE GOOD SHEPHERD HIMSELF, JESUS CHRIST. If by the grace of God we CAN honestly admit to ourselves how painfully inadequate we are, that we're never quite so generous or loving or kind or handsome as we'd like to BELIEVE we are; if we're able to HONESTLY and SINCERELY admit how pride and selfishness and lust tinge and corrupt every one of our thoughts and actions; if we would strip away the false pretense to finally concede that what people REALLY see are just our MASKS, that we're ALL lost and lonely and scared individuals in need of God's assistance and direction, ONLY THEN will we be able to hear Christ's voice and recognize his appearance when he approaches us. Jesus himself said that he came not for those who were HEALTHY, that is, for those who believed themselves to be too good and too strong to really need him. Rather, he came for those in need of a DOCTOR, for those persons who were sick in body and in mind, in soul and in spirit and who KNEW themselves to be so.

Friends, the bottom line is this, that Jesus ONLY COMES FOR SINNERS, REGARDLESS how dark our sins may be, that he's only looking for people who seem lost and can't find their way home again. And if you've ever known a time when you YOURSELF were lost, then you are in good company for that means you were then the perfect candidate to receive his presence and experience his love. Our Lord seeks out to save ONLY those who are lost, ONLY those who are lonely, ONLY those who are rejected, ONLY those who are hungry, ONLY those who are despairing, ONLY those who are fearful, ONLY those who are broken, and ONLY those who are riven with guilt. If you are NOT one of these, I can assure you that you really don't know yourself AT ALL and you'll miss him ENTIRELY when he DOES come looking for you. Scripture is abundantly clear: God doesn't help those who help themselves; rather, God helps those who are HELPLESS! And unless you are able to recognize your OWN helplessness, then there's not much help he CAN offer you.

This truth has the power to transform our lives unlike ANY other. It means that if you looked in the mirror and found that you're not feeling especially "holy" or "religious" or "respectable" this or ANY morning, then you're just the sort of person our Lord IS looking for. If you've come to church with a hangover from too much partying last night; if you're saddled with guilt for all the lies you feel you've gotten away with of late, or for betraying your spouse by carrying on an affair with a co-worker of yours; if you harbor feelings of hatred or jealousy for someone because the person seems so much more successful than you, or you steal from work because it's such a small amount and you don't think you'll ever get caught; or if your faith has grown so thin and weak you just don't know if God even exists anymore because you've had so much tragedy in your life and your prayers never seem to get answered, then I've got some WONDERFUL NEWS for you. Instead of feeling like an abject failure, like some poor schmuck

who knows he's weak and deeply flawed and never good enough to be of any use to ANYBODY much less to GOD, the fact is actually the OPPOSITE- those are PRECISELY the kinds of qualities Jesus is looking for in you this very morning. You, along with all your limitations and failures, are EXACTLY what he wants to be a part of his church family for what else IS his family but an ever-expanding gallery of rogues, a fellowship of proud liars and selfish thieves, a community of reckless adulterers and conscienceless murderers and sex offenders who but by the grace of God have discovered something about undeserved love and have never been the same since. And even if you protest loudly and say "I'VE never been a liar or a thief; I've never cheated on my spouse or taken somebody else's life," then remember how our Lord had said that merely ALLOWING such thoughts a place in our heart makes us NO DIFFERENT than the person who ACTUALLY COMMITS such crimes- that the one who HATES is no better than a MURDERER, and the one who LUSTS is no different than an ADULTERER. It is a FACT that we are ALL sinners, but FORTUNATELY FOR US, Christ dwells ONLY IN sinners, with persons JUST LIKE OURSELVES. However, if your pride will never allow you to become honest with yourselves and admit it, then the BAD news is that you'll NEVER recognize him or hear his voice when he DOES call out to you, shouting your name.

And not only will Jesus FIND you, but when he DOES, he never condemns ANYONE for their sins. As I pointed out in LAST WEEK'S sermon, he almost never referred to people as "sinners." Rather, he saw persons as those who for WHATEVER reason had become lost and disoriented and AS such were now alone and afraid- THESE are the ones he was concerned about MOST, the ones he had come to seek and to save in the FIRST place. He doesn't confront them about their betrayals. He doesn't disqualify them from his kingdom or deny them participation in any future ministry due to their faithlessness. He doesn't deliver any harsh lectures or fire-breathing sermons. He's not interested in heaping more shame and guilt upon them than they already have. Rather, he simply comes to FORGIVE them, not to judge them; to RESTORE them, not to condemn them. The fact he has come looking for us in the FIRST place to ALLAY OUR FEARS, to RECOVER OUR FAITH, and to RESTORE OUR HOPE- THAT ALONE is all the assurance you and I will ever need; THAT ALONE speaks volumes as to the depth of his love for it proves he would NEVER leave us REGARDLESS how great our faithlessness. We could deny him SEVEN TIMES SEVENTY and STILL he would seek us out to restore us to himself, so GREAT is his love for us! And when we recognize that voice and shout back in response, "Jesus, I'm over HERE! Come HELP me, PLEASE!" it may be THEN that the lyrics of a particular hymn—our CLOSING hymn for this morning's service--will assume a WHOLE NEW POWER AND MEANING for us. For it will have become our OWN anthem, describing our OWN STORY of having gone astray and then being recovered- *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me / I once was LOST but now am FOUND / Was blind, but now, I see.* Amen and amen.