

THE PARTY FOR THE FOUND

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 86; Luke 15: 1-10

School is starting again, and lots of students at NYU were piling out of their cars a couple of weeks ago, bringing into their dorms treasures and trash that they would be needing for a semester ahead, the decorations they would use in their room, the clothes that they would wear, the indispensable items for a college education today like iPods, and laptops, and cellphone chargers. None of these last three, incidentally, were needed when I entered college in the fall of 1969, because none of them existed.

One thing I do remember about my college matriculation so long ago, was how much time my mother had spent sewing my name into my clothes. She had bought one of those long, thin ribbons that repeat your name a hundred times. You cut it and sew it onto collars and around the neckbands and waistbands of shirts and trousers and coats. This in an effort to both stave off theft and loss.

Later when I got on campus and starting doing my own laundry, and people would take my clothes out of the dryer they would get mixed up with other people's clothes on the table in the laundry room. It was then that the usefulness of my mother's foresight and labor of love was proven a thousand times.

We all lose things from time to time. I find as the years go by that I am just not mindful of where I lay things. So I end up searching for my glasses and my keys and my briefcase and wonder why I am so absent minded.



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Every parent here knows the joys of searching for lost things. Your child can't find her red shoe, or her other sock which the cat took and hid under the bed. Your son is ready to go out the door for school and you ask if he has his homework, which leads to a great scurrying around going through piles of papers until, at last it is found in his backpack, right where it *should have been* and *was* all along.

In early youth and in late age we spend a fair amount of time looking for what is lost. It is part of the experience of being human. It reminds us that for all of our aspirations to trail glory we are still shaking off the dust.

I have mentioned before that my mother suffered from Alzheimer's disease. She eventually came to live in a place of many memories and lost memories, a nursing home.

It didn't help her situation that sometimes the staff as decent and kind as most of them were, nevertheless recognized a good new sweater when they saw one, or a nice blouse of some sort and they would steal them from the residents like my mother who were unaware of what was happening. The clothes would be gathered up and ostensibly go to the cleaners or to the laundry, but for whatever reason would never return. It was then that my sister decided to sew labels with my mother's name onto the collars and waistbands of mom's clothing.

I noticed an unfortunate thing at her nursing home, that when a resident lost something no one there ever took it very seriously. If a book was misplaced, or a sweater was missing, the aide working with the residents would say, “Mrs. Walton, it’ll show up.” And sometimes it did, and sometimes it didn’t. But what bothered me was the cavalier way in which concern for what was lost was dismissed as insignificant or unimportant, and accepted as normative.

Sometimes the memory of the residents was faulty. But most of the time the staff didn’t care to find out what had happened to the lost objects. Evidently, to the staff, if the lost item were not within immediate reach, it wasn’t worth searching to find. With a population that was as often as not living a decade or two off the clock, I can understand how searching for real and imagined losses could be an all consuming task for staff members; yet, even so, when what you have lost is all you can remember, even that much must be treated respectfully. After all, if losing is not important, then finding is not either.

This summer in Utah at the Crandall mine collapse there was a two week effort to find and save the lives of six miners who were trapped. In the process, three more miners gave their lives attempting to rescue the original six. Talk about demonstrating the risk of leaving the ninety-nine sheep to find the one lost sheep, in this case the six... and we see a little better what a great effort is made by the shepherd who risks all for the one who is lost.

I suppose the reason Jesus tells so many stories about losing and finding, searching and sweeping, looking and discovering has to do with the common human experience of being lost and being found.

His parables and stories are rich with characters who lose something of themselves and then are found. Today we read the story of the one lost sheep, so valuable to the shepherd that he would leave the ninety-nine to go and find the one who had gotten separated from the others.

This story is followed by the story of the woman who had ten coins, and who lost one, and who lit a lamp and swept the house, and wouldn’t give up until at last she had found the lost coin. She was so happy with its recovery that she gave a party for all her friends and neighbors, inviting them to come celebrate with her, probably spending more on the party than the worth of the coin. But she did so because she knew that the difference between poverty and wealth, security and insecurity, has something to do with being faithful with what you have.

The fifteenth chapter in Luke where three parables are told continues with what is perhaps the most famous losing and finding story in all of scripture, the parable of the Prodigal son. We didn’t read it today, but most of us know it by heart, as that story in which an errant son and brother returns home to a warm welcome from his father and a cold stare from his brother. It is arguably the most memorable of all Jesus’ parables.

Losing and finding were themes to which Jesus returned in his storytelling, again and again. Think of the parable of the man who discovers a treasure hidden in a field and who goes and sells all that he has in order to buy it. And the parable of the merchant in search for fine pearls who one day is sitting at his jewelers table eyeing the usual

collection, when suddenly he discovers that before him is a pearl of such great value that his eyepiece drops out when his eyelids raise; and he puts it aside, and goes and sells all he has and buys it.

In each of these parables we hear the earnestness with which God seeks us out and welcomes us home. Like a pearl of great price, or a treasure hidden in a field, or a sheep that has gotten lost, God seeks what is lost and is willing to pay any price, accept any risk to find.

The parables that we heard today, like many of the others are told as a foil to the arrogance and indifference of the scribes and Pharisees who carped at Jesus because it was said of him that he kept bad company, he ate with sinners and tax collectors, and well... even prostitutes. How could a good man spend his time with such carousers and quislings and people in the skin trade as he did? The scribes and Pharisees slandered him by saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

It was, of course, an accusation meant to set the scribes and Pharisees apart from Jesus, to shame him by association. But of course, it only works if you identify with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. If you are a tax collector, or a sinner, or a prostitute and the word on the street is that this man, who many say is the messiah, eats with us, then that claim is heard not as an accusation but as an invitation. It's all a matter of with whom you identify.

These two visions of what is faithful and right in God's eyes, the vision of the scribes and Pharisees, the hellfire and damnation folks of Jesus' time who believed that you must be a community apart untainted by the world and its sinfulness, is held by some corners of the Christian church to be only proper view of how to be faithful of Christ. Be separate, be exclusive, be untainted by those who sin.

The other vision of the church, that stands in stark contrast is the openness of Jesus who sought the lost, welcomed the outsider and invited into his company those upon whom others looked with scorn.

Diana Butler Bass, in a fascinating analysis of the church today, describes a middle way that is emerging in the old mainline denominations and which explains why there is growth in such places as this congregation, right here among us. She writes,

the ideal of a church that is a hospital for sinners [rather than an enclave of sinless exclusivity] occupies a comprehensive middle space, the mediating territory between Christian exclusivism and secularized inclusivism."¹

She continues:

Many people today, religious nomads isolated in time by modern amnesia, are trying to relocate themselves in the past. To get connected with their ancestors. To find their way back to an enchanted world. If you look you can see people remixing history everywhere. "...Christian America, that hellfire nation, of... conservative evangelicals has tremendous cultural appeal. It is a reading of the past that makes sense to those seeking certainty in an uncertain landscape. But it is also a political agenda to convince Christians that God has a particular future in mind for

us – a future that, not surprisingly, looks exactly like a policy statement from the religious right.

...Other Christians are remembering the past differently, reaching back to the ancient wisdom of the village church, a tradition that, at its best, both grounds a community and opens doors to wayfarers..... a kind of Christian community of practice that is both spiritual and open at the same time. Its doors are not barred by threats of eternal damnation. Rather signposts of Christian practice – the things people do together in community for the sake of God and the world – mark its sacred space.”²

I would like to think, no actually, I believe, that more and more we are becoming that kind of church. A place of community seeking after God, who is seeking after us. A community reflective of the complexity and humanity of this city, where people are received on the basis of the goodness in their heart, rather than the labels by which they are categorized. We are people who identify in the parable not with the scribes who question Jesus’ company, but with those who are lost sheep, thankful that God would risk so much as to seek us in that place where we are.

I’ve told this story before, but like all good stories it’s worth telling again. It’s a story of lostness and foundness and it’s a true story about a little girl, described in Anne Lamott’s book **Traveling Mercies**.

It seems that when this little girl was seven years old, she got lost.

[She] ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and he drove around until finally she saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, “You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”³

I would love it if all of us could say that on our spiritual journey, from here, we can always find our way home.

We’re going to go outside and have a picnic in a few minutes, an annual affair to celebrate getting back and getting starting in church school and being here. And the kids will be there playing and laughing and crying and making noise and screeching all over the North Lawn.

And some of the older folks will have someone help them with their food because their legs are not steady enough to allow them to wait in line. And others will give up their seat because someone who is in a wheelchair can’t find a seat. And some college kid from Iowa who is in the film school at NYU as a first year student and is visiting today will sit down and meet some people who came from Iowa too, many years ago. There’ll be black folks sitting with whites. Hispanics with Koreans and Chinese, natives of England sitting with Caribbean born, and almost none of us even noticing any of that any more.

Gay parents will talk about teething with other parents who have infants the same age. Some families will be around who are mixed religiously, one partner being Jewish

or Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist, and the other Christian, but who are happy that their other half is in a welcoming community like this.

It's pretty amazing when you step back and take a look each year at this picnic; each Sunday when we pile into the sanctuary. Amazing... who we are and what this is. It's a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. For all of its flaws and imperfections, it's the church, or at least what the church is supposed to be, a community of those whom Jesus has sought, sheep that got lost, coins recovered, pearls of great price, treasure hidden in a field. A party for the found.

It makes me glad every time I see it. And while it makes the scribes and Pharisees grumble every time they do, I think Jesus loves it, just like Jesus loves you and me.

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¹ Diana Butler Bass, **Christianity for the Rest of Us**. HarperSanFrancisco, 2006. 37.

² Ibid. 38-39

³ Anne Lamott, **Traveling Mercies**. New York: Pantheon, 1999. 55.