

## SOUGHT

Luke 15:1-10

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time      September 15, 2019

*I saw them eating and I knew who they were.* That is a Middle Eastern proverb that Jesus probably knew. [Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that it] does not make much sense in our own age of fast food and [meals spent staring at our phones], but in Jesus' day what you ate and [with] whom you ate it ... were critical matters.

This was especially true among the Jews [of the time], for whom eating together was – literally – a religious experience. To eat together was to celebrate their faith, which included very specific rules about what happened around the table. Cleanliness was paramount: clean food, clean dishes, clean hands, clean hearts. A proper Jewish meal was a worship service in which believers honored God by sanctifying the most ordinary details of their lives.

Jesus offended a lot of people with his table manners. He ignored the finger bowl by his plate. He ate whatever was put in front of him. He thought nothing of sitting down to eat with filthy people whose lives declared their contempt for religion. People saw him eating and they knew who he was: someone who had lost all sense of what was right, who condoned sin by eating with sinners and who might as well have spit in the faces of the good people who raised him.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus tells the three parables of Luke 15 – the lost sheep, the lost coin, which Hannah Faye just read, and the story of the man with the two sons – in response to the religious leaders and teachers who were offended by his table manners. It's important to remember this context, because without it, the force of the parables is lost, and they become simply nice statements about God's persistent grace. Telling nice statements about the persistence of God's grace generally doesn't put the one telling them in danger. But we should have no illusions here; telling the three parables of Luke 15 did put Jesus in danger.

Lest we be too hard on Jesus' religious critics who spawned such danger – those to whom Jesus directed his parables – we should note that both sides in the conversation had substantive and compelling claims. We understand Jesus' point here. But the concerns of the Pharisees were rooted in warnings firmly fixed in the first Psalm about taking “the path that sinners tread.” In fact, they are the kinds of concerns we who are parents have often tried to pass on to our children: “Choose your friends wisely.” Fred Craddock notes that “It is easy enough to sit at a distance and cheer on Jesus as he welcomes sinners and socializes with them; it is not [nearly] so easy to be his disciple in the matter.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Table Manners,” *Christian Century*, March 11, 1998, 257.

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, Hayes, Holladay and Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: C*, Valley Forge, Trinity Press International, 1994, 408

The Pharisees [were] not alone in believing that the separation of good and bad people preserves a community's sense of righteousness and is essential for the moral instruction of the young. Jesus' failure to observe such distinctions seemed to some dangerous to the moral and religious fiber of the community and disturbingly radical. It is still so regarded by some, even within the church.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, this is what Jesus does. There is no escaping it, because each of these parables is a forceful revelation of the extravagance of God's concern for the low-down, lost and outcast members of society. Taken together, these parables are a sustained testimony to God's passion and freedom in seeking people who appear to be insignificant and wayward, and to the unbridled joy of heaven over their restoration to the fold.<sup>4</sup>

A lost sheep. A lost coin. Lost keys. Lost wallet. Lost cellphone. We all lose things. And normally, if we are able to find them again, we chastise ourselves for our carelessness or our forgetfulness, and we try to figure out how not to lose them again. We may even share the news of finding our lost item with our family. But these parables go one step further, and it seems odd. Mary Schertz says, rarely would we throw a party and invite the neighbors:

The shepherd and the [homemaker], however, behave differently. With abandon they gather friends and neighbors and invite them to help celebrate the successful searches... The mood is extravagant, abundant and generous. The occasion is unambiguously designated as party time!

[What Jesus says here by such hyperbole is that the] lostness of the human community is [nothing less than a crisis, and its recovery is nothing less than a triumph....] God's passion is bent toward the service of the lost; God's mercy is reckless and profligate. It is a ...passion [for prodigals], and *our* visions of salvation are measly by comparison.<sup>5</sup>

We may not see the world the way Jesus does, but if we will but weigh his stories, we will begin to see that they really do contain good news. They do, at least, when we begin to grasp that *we* are among the lost – sometimes more than we understand, often more than we're willing to admit. Sometimes we are lost of our own volition, hiding from the world for whatever reason. God still seeks us. Sometimes we are lost in grief and can find no solace. God seeks us. When we are lost in self-righteousness and foolish pride, even then God seeks us. We get lost in myriad ways, and when we do, God always seeks us. We are sought by God. The only question is whether we will let ourselves be found.

Fred Craddock, that wonderful preacher, often told of how he and his friends would play Hide and Seek as children. The game was cheap, and they had a big yard with lots of good hiding places. You've played the game. Somebody is it, and whoever is it closes his or her eyes and counts to a hundred and then says, "Ready or not, here I come," and then goes looking for those who have hidden.

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<sup>3</sup> Craddock, *Luke*, 184-185.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Tiede, *Luke: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, 272.

<sup>5</sup> Mary H. Schertz, "God's Party Time," *Christian Century*, September 4, 2007, 44. Italics mine.

Well, Fred said, “When my brother was it, he cheated. He would start off well enough. He would close his eyes and start counting, ‘One, two, three, four, five...ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. Ready or not, here I come.’ But I didn't care, because I always had great hiding places scouted out in advance [and one favorite place in particular].”

“I was small as a child,” Fred said, “so I could squeeze into the space under our front steps. There were bushes that hid me from view. No one would even think of looking back there. It was a great hiding place.”

“My brother would come right by me, but he couldn't see me,” Fred said. “He'd go all over looking, then walk right back by. I had to concentrate to keep from laughing out loud and giving myself away. I thought, he'll never find me here! He'll never find me here! And then it hit me, he'll never *find me here*.”

“And so, after a while,” Fred said, “I would move the bushes a bit. And he'd come up and see those bushes and yell, ‘I see you. I see you.’ Then he ran back to touch the base and yelled, ‘You're it. You're it. I found you.’”

And I came out, brushing myself off, and said, "Darn it, you found me."

What did I want? To hide. Yes. Yes. What did I *really* want? What did I really want? The same thing as each and every person in this room. Every person.<sup>6</sup>

Poets don't see a different world than the rest of us see; they see the same world differently. They describe things that many of us experience, but either fail to notice or more feebly describe. Over time, I have been particularly moved by poets and writers who have described what it means to be lost... and of the deep longing to be found. In nineteenth century England, as Francis Thompson was emerging from an opium addiction that had almost killed him, he wrote a poem – his one famous poem – in which he described God as the Hound of Heaven, pursuing him like a bloodhound might pursue a criminal. And so, he ran as far as he could:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
 Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears  
 I hid from Him.<sup>7</sup>

More than a hundred years later, Anne Lamott found herself in the midst of a similarly deep addiction. She, too, would experience the persistent seeking of God, but not as a bloodhound. For Lamott, who was scraping by on the shores of San Francisco Bay, it came in the form of a small cat:

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Craddock, in a sermon preached at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina on February 18, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Thompson, “The Hound of Heaven,” in *The Collected Poetry of Francis Thompson*, BiblioLife, LLC, 52.

Everywhere I went, I had the feeling a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So, I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

[The next Sunday], when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs.... This time I stayed for the sermon, which I thought was just ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but [the last hymn] was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "...I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."<sup>8</sup>

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock," Jesus would say elsewhere. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." And he doesn't knock just once. He knocks again and again. Like a shepherd who won't rest until that one sheep is found. Like a woman possessed with finding a lost coin. Like a father who waits and waits and watches for his prodigal to return. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock... If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will eat with them, and they will eat with me." (Rev. 3:20) It doesn't matter how you have become lost. Jesus wants table fellowship with you. All one has to do is to say, "All right. You can come in." It doesn't matter if we are saints or sinners, clean or unclean, taxpayers or tax collectors... all we have to do is say, "All right. You can come in." Of course, if we do let him in and sit at table with him and hear his voice, it might change everything. If we let him come to our table, there's no telling what might happen to our own table manners... because you know, Jesus seems always to be expanding the boundaries and borders of who's acceptable and worthy of a place at the table. If we let him in, eventually we might just grasp what this seeker is asking of us.

I've been thinking this morning that today is a wonderful day in the life of this church. Look around and you will see more faces in this room than we've seen all summer. Church School is cranking up. The choir is full and stirring us with their music. We're so glad Michael Shake and the choir are here! And Hannah Faye, and there is more good staff news to come soon. If you stay for coffee hour you may smile at the buzz. In the days ahead, many of our programs will begin to take off. Our action teams and committees and boards are back from their summer break. It is a good day at Old First Church.

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Pantheon, 1999, 50. I am grateful to Leanne Pearce Reed and a paper she presented to the January 2007 meeting of the Moveable Feast for linking Thompson's and Lamott's writing.

Now, here's the trick [says Martha Sterne]: We are [here] doing church, and that's good. But we have followed Jesus in here, we have [invited him in and] gathered together... so that [this week and] every week we can follow Jesus *out* of here... [because] Jesus [always] seems to care inordinately about the ones who aren't here. This interest may seem unreasonable to those of us who show up and [give our time and] keep the... church humming, but [then again] it *is* the gospel.

Jesus came to save the lost – lost sheep, lost coins, lost brothers, lost prostitutes, lost loan sharks, [lost politicians; all those] forgotten about or dismissed because of their unworthiness are the very ones that Jesus has headed out to look for. He looks back over his shoulder to see if we are following him....<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Martha P. Sterne, "Living by the Word: Seeking the lost sheep," *Christian Century*, August 26-September 2, 1998, 781. Italics mine.