

“God Wants You Found”

Daniel Boone was supposed to have been asked one day if he had ever been lost. He replied, “Never, but there were three days once when I didn’t know where I was!” I suspect that some of you here have had a similar experience. Being lost, whether it be physical in a literal sense, or lost in a mental or spiritual or moral way, lost-ness is a real human condition that Jesus addresses in today’s Gospel lesson by telling stories. The two parables taught by Jesus are directed to those who are lost and know it ... and to those who are lost and don’t know it.

The religious establishment in Jesus’ time was governed by the Pharisees and the Scribes. In their estimation, they were not lost because they kept the letter of the Law. But they felt Jesus was lost because he was associating with “the people of the land,” which was a general classification the Pharisees gave people who did not observe the details of the Law. They were lost, hopeless souls ... outcasts ... sinners and Jesus was guilty by association. However, in the eyes of Jesus, as vividly taught through parables, all people were lost ... all had fallen short ... all were sinners ... and as such, needed to return to God. Jesus’ purpose for teaching these parables is to help people acknowledge they are lost and in need of God’s grace!

This is why I think that Luke 15 is one of the great chapters of the New Testament. In short, story-telling form, we are afforded the opportunity to find hope within our human predicament. Here we have the barebones of the Gospel ... good news within good news ... the gospel in the Gospel. Each one of us stands within the framework of Luke 15. There are times when we act like the Pharisees and scribes ... those times when we are cocksure of being a Christian and judge others for their sinfulness. With our sense of goodness, we easily drift into self-righteousness ... comparing our behavior with others and judging others as being “more sinful and less redeemable than ourselves. There is a thin line between being smug or humble.

Reminds me of the time a Washingtonian was driving through Boyds and stopped a local to ask directions: “Does this road lead to Frederick?” The local replied, “I don’t know.” Well, does it lead to Clarksburg?” “I wouldn’t know,” said the local. The traveler said, “Well, does this road lead to Urbana?” “I don’t know,” replied the local. “Well, what do you know?” asked the traveler. And the local Boyddian replied, “I know I’m not lost!”

All of us at one time or another have thought or prayed, “Thank God, I am not like one of those people.” Those people? Yes ... the criminal, the less fortunate, the not-so-bright, the ill-mannered, or one who is addicted to something. “Thank God, I am better than that.” When we think better of ourselves than others, the danger is that we close the door to the Gospel being communicated to others through us. I suspect that we feel more secure and safe when we think better of our selves ... when we deny being lost.

Of course, there are those days when our self-protected world caves it ... those days when reality refuses to be denied. Those are the times when we frightfully become aware of how vulnerable we truly are in this world ... how easily we can lose our way. It’s like the shepherd said when asked how it was that sheep stray away and get lost. He answered: “They nibble themselves lost.” What Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes, he tells us as well ... all human beings are “the people of the land” ... all are lost. We are reminded of that fact during the nights we can’t sleep ... when we are so anxious ... so fearful ... so worrisome because we’re not sure where our life is going ... we not sure if we’re in the driver’s seat or we are being driven!

On October 9, 2005, five Mexican fisherman set out from San Blass, Mexico, to look for sharks. Unfortunately, their 27 foot fiberglass boat developed motor problems and they were left adrift. Two men jumped off the boat in an attempt to swim for safety and drowned. The other three men did their best to survive ... and survived they did. They ate raw fish, sea gulls, and ducks, if they could snare them, and drank rainwater. There were stretches as long as fifteen days that they went without food. They read their Bible every day. The winds carried the fisherman across the Pacific until they neared the Marshall Islands, a trip of over 5,500 miles. They were rescued by a Taiwanese fishing vessel in mid-August 2006, over nine months after they embarked on their trip. There was much joy at their discovery and return ... joy as when the woman found her lost coin.

Those hearing Jesus telling about the woman who lost one coin out of ten would have understood far better than you or I. I mean, I know I wouldn't turn the house upside down looking for one coin. While we keep coins jangling in our pockets or throw them onto a counter or lose them easily on the floors of our cars, the pressed metal Jesus has in mind is probably the dowry given a bride by her father. These would not be cheap throwaway pennies, but solid masses of silver or gold that together gave testimony to the father's esteem of his daughter. A hole was punched in each coin, and a leather thong passed through so that the dowry became a piece of jewelry to be worn in honor. Over time, of course, a hole drilled too close to the edge of a coin might wear through, and the coin would fall from the string. This is the scene Jesus imagines with his hearers.

The outcome would be devastating for the woman. Suddenly the prized necklace would show its imbalance and flaw, and thereby be unwearable for shame. This, in turn, would call forth the challenges of both husband and father, each of whom would berate the woman for her mismanagement of the family treasure. As she searches her home to find the lost coin, the woman would fear her own devaluation in society. Only the recovery of the shiny coin would renew her standing. For that reason, Jesus focuses on the joy the woman experiences when her frenzied search produces results. The implication is subtle but profound ... so, too, the sense of recovered personal worth by God only when any of God's children are restored.

In a spiritual sense, lost is a human condition that shocks us into an awareness that we need to be found. Lost is the sinful state that begs God's forgiveness. Lost is knowing we are moving in the wrong direction ... becoming terribly uncomfortable with our life ... lost is the conscience pricked and we know we are behaving badly or self-destructively and we need to change. Yes, there are those who know they are lost and those who don't know they are lost ... one is more sad than the other ... sad in the sense that unless we can admit to ourselves that we are lost ... admit we are one of "the people of the land ... confess that we are sinners in need of redemption ... then we can never experience the healing of God's grace ... or know the hope of good news ... or live in the love and peace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is great truth spoken in today's parables. We are not the shepherd or the woman, but we are that one sheep ... that one coin. We are not the ones seeking ... we are the ones being sought!!

This is truly Good News, because often we run after God yelling: "God, where are you? I can't find You." We question God's existence because can't find God within our experience. We study. We worship. We practice our faith. We pray. We do all these things and still we wonder ... where is God in my life? Why isn't God obvious? God is not obvious, because God is not lost. You are lost! I am lost! God is not lost! As one writer puts it: "When God becomes the center of our universe, and our lives revolve around Him instead of us, (we realize) God is not in *my* world; I am in *His*."

You see, neither the lost sheep, nor the lost coin, does a blessed thing except hang around in its lost-ness. Therefore, on the strength of this parable, it is precisely our sins, not our goodness, that most commend us to the grace of God. These two parables are not exhortations on repentance, trying to convince us that God will forgive us, if only we lift ourselves to some acceptable level of spiritual development. No! These two parables speak of God's determination to move us ... to seek us ... to save us from our destructive selves. God alone gives life, and God gives it freely and fully on no conditions whatsoever.

These two parables are about grace and grace alone! There is not one single note of earning or merit ... not one breath about rewarding the reward-able ... correcting the correctable ... improving the improvable. No! Jesus teaches about humans being lost ... lost is their sinful state ... lost but knowing it ... lost but confess it ... because knowing and accepting the fact that we are lost is the first step toward being found! Repentance is the recognition of being lost, as well as repentance is the key to being found. When we admit to ourselves ... when we confess to God ... how far we have fallen, we then open ourselves to being found ... to being saved ... then our life is changed. You see, the changed life is the result of being found by God. God is forever looking for us. When we permit God to find us, our life is changed.

God will find you. You may do almost anything to avoid God ... you may even "nibble" your way lost ... and as such, you are like the First Man and the First Woman, who hid because they were ashamed. But there is a *relentlessness* about the grace of God. God "seeks until He finds." And when God finds the lost ... when God finds you, there is a party in heaven. For Jesus said, "I tell you, there will be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who (think they) do not need to repent." Lost sheep! Lost coin! Lost you! Repent! Be changed! Rejoice! Be lost no more! Know this ... God wants you found!