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Luke 15:1-10

### “Lost and Found”

Sometimes Jesus told parables, stories, in order to give us a better look into the heart of God. At other times, Jesus seems to become a parable, a window into whose words and deeds we closely peer and discover that we are looking at a revelation of God. In today’s scripture lesson, Jesus is doing both. The rucus begins when the righteous, the tax collectors, with access to money, and the Pharisees, with knowledge of religion and the law, mutter charges at Jesus: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

As Jesus often does, rather than confronting his accusers head on, he launches into a parable, a vignette.

Clarence Jordan tells us that a parable is like a Trojan horse, it comes to the walls of our protected lives, we take a look at it, sniff around it, and discover that these little yarns Jesus spins look harmless enough and so we open up our lives, let him in, and before we know it: surprise, sneak attack! It’s got us.

The Pharisees and Scribes’ accusations are not new. They are the same charges we hear in other places in Luke’s gospel, this Jesus guy isn’t conforming to social standards, he’s hanging out with the wrong people, sharing his table and fellowship with low-life sinners, unlike them of course.

In response to their criticism Jesus tells these wonderful little stories. Which one of you shepherds, he says, when watching your flock by night, when one strays will you not leave the other 99 sheep alone to rush out in the wilderness, clamber through a few cold mountain streams, scratch your way up a pebbly crag, throw yourself down the face of a cliff in order to find that one lost sheep? And when you find that sheep, which one of you will not place that sheep upon your shoulders, rush all the way home, sweaty and out of breath (where you discover that you now have far fewer sheep than you once had) wake up your friends in the middle of the night and say: “I found my sheep; it’s party time!” Now which of you would not do that?

Which of you, when you have lost a quarter, will not move all of the furniture out of the house, rip up the carpet, dust out the corners, move the stove away from the wall, and when you finally find that quarter, turn a few Duke benches into a bon fire, fill the quad with fake foam, and party as if the Blue Devils had won a national title? Now which of you would not do that?

The truth is, of course, none of us would do that. The searching shepherd and woman, extravagant parties thrown for found sheep and recovered quarters, aren’t much like us; but Jesus says, that’s what God is like. God searches. God finds. God saves, the lost. God throws parties of extravagant grace for sinners.

Being lost. We all get lost from time to time, on the road, in our careers, in our relationships, in the depths of our hearts and souls – even on the internet we get lost. Lostness is nothing new to God’s people. The Israelites walked out into the wilderness, into being lost, traipsing across the barrenness of the desert for 40 year, all the while trusting that God was out there with them, that God was going to find them, that the

promised land would catch up to them, eventually. There is no shame in being lost. The best of us get lost. Maybe that's why Tolkien told us in the Lord of the Rings, "not all who wander are lost."

Do you remember what it was like, when you were four or five years old, playing with the transformers in the toy section of the department store on a Saturday afternoon, and when you looked up your mom had wandered away? Don't you remember walking, then jogging, then running around the store, the tears beginning to stream down your face as panic seized your heart, then finally rounding the corner of the men's knit shirt section, and there was your mom, more panicked than you were? Do you remember how the delightful joy of finally being found outweighed the anxiety of being lost?

During a time of darkness and confusion in his own life, at a time when he felt lost and did not know where to turn, the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, one of the great spiritual guides of the last century wrote the following prayer:

"MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire." Even as lost as Merton feels, by the end of his prayer he comes to the assurance that with this God, even the lost aren't really "lost," and so Merton continues to pray: "And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

I know people who say it was at the point they were totally lost, when they had hit rock bottom, that their lives turned around. I recall a conversation with an alcoholic who said it wasn't until she finally admitted that there was nowhere else to run, when the darkness was utterly black, that she was surprised by grace; she was found. Our God loves us so much, that God can use even our lostness to bring us closer.

Perhaps Jesus is saying that being lost, knowing that you are lost, admitting that you are lost is a good thing. God will find you in that. There is another kind of lost, a far worse kind of loss that looks something like these Pharisees and tax collectors, to be lost and not know that you are lost, to be so sure of oneself and one's place in life that all around is black and white, inside here, outside there, sinners over there, saved over here. In such certainty like that, in a box like that, nothing can get in, when you don't know that you are lost, there is no need for the overwhelming grace of being found.

Sometimes what we desperately need in our lives is to get lost, to get out of those boxes like the Pharisees and Scribes' created, those boxes that feel good and secure and safe, and trust, that even though stepping out into the darkness is frightening, God is already searching for us out there. Sometimes we choose to leave the boxes ourselves, at other times we are pushed out of them by forces beyond our control; being lost remains the only way to be found by grace. I remember well the businessman who told me, "losing my job was the most terrifying experience of my entire life, it was also the best thing that could have ever happened to me."

I recently went with a student to see Spiderman 2. In the movie, Spiderman comes to a point where he is tired of being a hero, he's tired of doing good, he's tired of

putting his needs aside for others. He's thinking about giving it up, settling back into his comfort zones, into his regular everyday Peter Parker life. His wise Aunt Mae, a woman who has seen much pain in her life says the following to Spiderman: "I believe there is a hero in all of us; that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride, even though sometimes we have to be steady, and give up the thing we want the most... even our dreams."

Sometimes the most heroic thing we can do is step out in faith, doing our best to put our desires, our needs, our dreams aside, and follow God's call in our lives, even if we don't know what will happen, even if we can't see the end of the tunnel, we go forward anyway, knowing that God is already out there looking for us; trusting that we will be found. William Sloan Coffin says that "faith is stepping out into the unknown and trusting that we will grow wings."

The church has called our Dean, Will Willimon, to new leadership in Christ's service. And while we grieve the departure of our pastor and friend, we celebrate this new step in his life, the faith and courage he shows to leave a place, Duke Chapel, that he loves so much to do what God is calling him to do in Birmingham – and surely it must be God's call, for someone to leave Duke to go to Birmingham. And yet while we celebrate with Will and Patsy, those of us here may feel somewhat lost, grieving the departure of our pastor and friend, one has led this chapel with great courage and wisdom, faith and humor, these last twenty years.

There have been times in history when God's people were deeply lost. Back in 1968, just after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated was a much more intense time of grieving and concern and fear over what would happen in the future. At King's funeral at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, James Bevel began to speak to the grieving masses, and he said, "Martin Luther King Jr. was not our leader," and ripples went through the crowd as people imagined Bevel was trying to take credit for the movement, that he wanted to become the new leader – Bevel went on, and now he was getting into the rhythm of his homily, and his voice soared above the grief in Ebenezer Church, "No, our leader is not dead. Our leader is the one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Our leader is the one who led Shadrach, Meeschach and Abendigo through that fiery furnace, our leader is the one who spoke to the disciples from the empty tomb. Our leader is not gone, our leader is Christ Jesus, and right now, he is leading on."

And this is grace, that no matter happens to us as people or communities, whether you are lost in a relationship that is spinning out of control, or you have an addiction that you have fought and fought and cannot will yourself to let go of, or you have lost your job and you are terrified about what is going to happen next, or you are making some change in your life because you believe that God is calling you to something new and you are nervous and excited all at the same time, or if you come to this chapel on a weekly basis and now you are grieving, like me, because one that you love, one who has become our pastor and friend has been called to a new path in his own life, whatever it is, God will never leave you. Right now God is seeking, searching, waiting for us.

Near the end of the movie "A Beautiful Mind," the brilliant mathematician John Nash, who would later go on to win a Nobel Prize, has spiraled downward in mental illness, no longer able to tell what is real from what is not. He has even raised a hand against his beloved wife. And so his wife Alicia has made the agonizing decision to have him institutionalized. In the scene, John is alone, on his bed, terrified, lost in the

brokenness of his mind, in the darkness of his own life, he waits for the ambulance to come and take him away. John hears footsteps slowly coming up the stairs, in dread, he assumes the worst, that the hospital orderlies have come to pin him down and take him to the mental hospital.

Instead it is Alicia, his wife, she walks into the darkening room and kneels gently at his bed. She talks to him softly, she tells him she will stay with him, that even now in the deep darkness and confusion of his life, she will never leave him.

. And then she takes his hand, rubs it gently to her tear-soaked cheek, places it against her heart, and in a soothing voice she says, “John, this is real.” “Trust me. Trust my love. I will never leave you.” In that love a soul that was lost is found.

Friends this is grace, the grace of God, the one who comes to each of us, who is searching for us right now, who waits for us to step out in faith . . . the one who says trust me, wherever you go, I will find you and bring you home. Amen.