

“NOT CHURCH AS USUAL: I – LOST SHEEP”

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Luke 15:1-10

Once upon a time, there was no such thing as GPS. You all know what that is, of course – Global Positioning System. When I was growing up, we had something else to show us the way – and it was called a map. Remember those? Those big old, unwieldy things – that you had to practically contort yourself to get it folded up to a manageable position?

I don't know – in reality, I actually liked those old maps – I liked laying them out and seeing the big picture, not just where you were going but everywhere around it. But they had their shortcomings. In an era where roads and developments were being built practically every day, those maps became outdated rather quickly – and you could find yourself lost pretty easily.

But even worse than getting lost because of a map that was outdated, was getting lost because you didn't have a map at all! Ever have that happen to you? I have, and it's not pretty!

I'm sure that every one of us has gotten lost at one time or another in our life – both literally and figuratively – so you know what it feels like. Sometimes being lost is mildly annoying. Sometimes it's disruptive, making us late to an appointment or to meet someone or to see a movie or a show. And sometimes, being lost is downright scary.

Nobody likes to be lost, for long, anyway. And when we are, we like to know, at least, that someone is missing us, and eventually will come looking for us.

When Jesus was talking to the scribes and Pharisees on that day long ago, he knew that all of them knew what it was like to be lost as well. They were human, they had gotten lost one time or another, so when he started talking about lost things, he knew that they would understand.

But, my friends, there is something really important that we need to remember – the reason they were having this conversation in the first place. The reason they were having this conversation in the first place is that these scribes and Pharisees had been criticizing Jesus for the kind of people with whom he was associating – tax collectors and sinners. They were not happy with him for hanging around with “unclean” people – or to put it another way, “lost” people.

So Jesus tells them some stories from the “Lost and Found” department – first, the story of a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, but one was lost, and he

moved heaven and earth to find that one sheep, and when he found it, he laid it on his shoulders and rejoiced. And then, the story of a woman with a lost coin, who moved heaven and earth to find that coin, and when she found it, she too rejoiced. And Jesus says, after both of them found their treasure they couldn't help but share their joy with others.

If we had kept on reading in Luke, we would have discovered that Jesus told yet another story – the story of a lost son, a prodigal son, whose return was a source of great joy and celebration for his father and community.

In all of these ways, I think Jesus was trying to tell these judgmental scribes and Pharisees to quit spending so much time fixating on his shortcomings and on his breaking their precious laws, and start thinking about the tax collectors and sinners in their “lostness” if you will, as people in need of their care, prayers and support. To remember, that just like them, God loved these people and wanted to bring them home. Perhaps Jesus thought that these stories of being lost and found, of rejoicing at coming home, would soften their hardened hearts a bit – I hope they did.

You know, whenever I read scripture I try to see where I am in it, and I suspect you do too. I can identify today with the shepherd and the woman, for I know what it's like to lose something or someone important, how frustrating it is, how scary it can be, how desperate you are to find it or them.

And sadly, if I'm honest, I can identify with the scribes and Pharisees because I can be judgmental at times, as well, making judgments about people based upon their circumstances and not their hearts. How about you?

But today, I want to invite us to see ourselves as the lost ones in the story – the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost sinner – because, if we're honest, we're probably more like them than the others. We know how easy it is to get lost, to sin, to veer off course, to wander away from God, to wander away from being the people that God created us to be.

Oh, it happens so easily. Author James W. Moore writes that it happens in a number of ways – we get lost by wandering off, we get lost by being led astray, we get lost by running away; and we get lost by resentment. (James W. Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, “Sin . . . and Grace,” p. 101)

I think he's onto something, so let's look a little more closely at those four things.

Sometimes, first, we get lost, we move away from being the people God created us to be, simply by wandering off. Usually it happens gradually. Other things grab our attention or our time. We say that we'll just miss church this Sunday, and go back the next, but then the next comes, and we miss again. Or we say that we'll have a more deliberate prayer and devotional life, but then we get

tired, and forget about it for a little while, which turns into a big while. Or we say we'll reach out to somebody in need but not just now, we'll get to it later, but we never do. We get lost because we just wander away.

Did you hear that little children's story we read? That's what the little rabbit did – he just wandered off because he wanted what he wanted when he wanted it, despite the warnings from his mother who loved him dearly. And oh, how often do we do the same thing? We get lost because we, little by little, wander away from God.

But sometimes we get lost because we're led astray by others. And in the world in which we live today, that happens more and more. We're led astray from God and from being the people God created us to be by a world that increasingly turns its back on God. We're led astray by a society that has basically taken away "holy time" replacing it with stores open 24/7, sports schedules that include Sundays, and saddest of all, an attitude that says "it's all about me." It's so easy in a world like we live in, to fall prey to forgetting God and getting lost.

The third thing Moore suggests is that we get lost by running away from God – not just wandering off, and not just being led astray – but actually running the other way. Like the prodigal son, we don't want the responsibility or the accountability of being the children of God – so we run away from Him – and find ourselves lost.

Finally, Moore says, we get lost because of resentment, and sadly, all of us have probably seen people lost from God because of that. They're angry because life hasn't turned out the way they thought it would, or because something terrible happened to them or someone they love. You know, some people turned away from God after the events that happened 15 years ago today to our country, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. It's not that they blamed God for it, but they just couldn't understand how God could let it happen – so they turned and left God out of resentment.

Now, I don't know which one of those applies to you, but I think it's safe to say that at least one of those things hit home for you – that there have been times when you've felt lost, apart from God. And maybe someone here today feels like that, even though you're here.

The Good News of the Gospel, friends, is that we don't have to stay lost – because there is One always searching for us, always reaching for us, always ready with open arms to welcome us home and embrace us – and that One is God Himself. It is never too late, we are never too lost, we are never so far gone, that God in Christ won't, if we turn around, welcome us home and let us begin again! There is no better news for all of us than that.

And the Good News is that we are here to hear that great news! But you know what? There are so many who are lost who are not here to hear it. So they need someone to tell them, and maybe that someone is you.

I read an incredibly powerful story this week by Janet Hunt where she tells about a time when she was a child at school, and she got lost, in a way. She says it was the beginning of a new school year, she had a new teacher, and one day, when her class went out on the playground, she discovered that her sister's class was also out on the playground, and she went over and joined her sister and her friends. So it was that she was away from her classmates when the teacher called them together to form a single line and get ready to go back into the building. This was a long time ago and the class would go up the fire escape stairs back into their room – which is exactly what they did – all the while Janet was blissfully unaware they were gone, playing, as she was, with her sister and her friends.

But at some point, she suddenly had this feeling that something was wrong, and she looked around, and couldn't find her class. She ran over to the stairs and ran up them as quickly as she could, and in her words, "found myself peering through the window of the fire door that locks when you got out and which will not open without a key, and I saw my classmates taking off their jackets and hanging them on their designated hooks. My teacher saw me (she writes), and she told the other children not to let me in." (True story!)

Well, Janet said, that she sat down and considered her options. She could run around to the front of the school and come in the front door, but then she'd have to walk by the office and she'd get in trouble. She could just walk home, but then have to face the wrath of her mother. Or, she could just sit there and wait. Which is what she did. She sat and waited – for a good hour or so until the school day was over, and finally the door was opened to her so that she could come back in and complete the lesson she had missed.

Looking back on that experience now (47 years later), Hunt had some powerful reflections. Listen to what she said: "Through it all, I knew exactly where I was. I was perched at the top of the fire escape outside the third grade classroom . . . even so, I was 'lost.' I was away from where I belonged. My getting lost started with my getting separated from the flock – from my fellow third graders. My attention got distracted a little bit at a time and pretty soon there was no getting back to where I belonged on my own . . . and the only way I could get back to where I belong was if someone else opened the door." (On-line, "Getting Lost and Getting Found: Joy in the Presence of the Angels!" Janet Hunt)

Now, why did I tell you that story, except for the fact that it's another "lost and found" story? Well, I told you that story because I believe that you and I are called to be the ones to open the door to God for those who are lost. While I know that you know that that's what we're called to do as disciples of Christ, I also know that it can seem kind of scary – a difficult thing to do. So let me help you out a little. What if you simply started with those who are lost from us here at the church? What if you thought about someone you used to be with us here in worship but isn't here any longer – perhaps because they've wandered away, or gotten busy,

or feel forgotten? What if you gave them a call and told them you missed them? It might be just what they need to come back to the Lord.

Those who are lost, who are wandering out there, away from God, away from the church, desperately need to hear from us. I heard just recently of a young mother who is searching, who actually posted on Facebook to her friends, “Somebody invite me to your church.” How sad that she had to ask, but oh how glad I am that she had the courage to!

Who knows how many people out there just want to be invited to church, to God? They’re lost and they know it, and they don’t know how to get where they need to go – but we do. We know about the God who loves them so much he is constantly looking for them, and waits to enfold them in his arms of love, mercy and grace. And we know about the church and the wonderful community it can be – a community of love, support, care and even fun – a place to journey together, hand in hand with each other, and hand in hand with God.

So friends, think about those you used to see here but don’t see anymore, or the young family who might be searching for something more, or the new neighbor who might want to find community, or the person who has experienced hardship after hardship, or the family member who seems lost. Talk to them, listen to them, tell them about our church, invite them to come with you. And remember, you don’t have to convince them of everything, you just need to open the door – God will do the rest.

Oh please friends, let us not be like those scribes and Pharisees, who looked down on the lost – let us instead let them know we understand, and offer them a hand in finding their way home.

As the hymn we’ll sing later says, “It only takes a spark to get a fire going.” Who knows what you can do in the life of someone who is lost, if you strike that spark? They might just find their way home – to God – and when they do, we, with all the angels in heaven, will rejoice! May it be so.

Amen.