

The Lost

Pentecost 14, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn. A. Brumbaugh

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1 Timothy 1:12-17 / Luke 15:1-10

We've all had the experience of losing something.

Something you've misplaced, and spent minutes, hours, or days looking for,
until it finally shows up.

Whether it's that piece of jewelry left to us by a beloved family member,
or that piece of paper with the information we now need to reference
that has become elusive and outside our grasp.

We all know the frustration of looking and looking, but not finding it anywhere.

My particular favorite is when I am sure I put it "somewhere I wouldn't lose it"
but have no idea where that "somewhere" is when the time comes.

We know the frustration well,

as well as the joy and relief when we finally do locate it.

Much worse though, is when we misplace a person.

Many of us, particularly the parents among us,
probably know all too well the sense of panic
when a child disappears in that moment
we divert our attention for just a second.
I used to take my goddaughters to the beach each year,
and I'll never forget one of the first years,
when Kylie was probably six or seven,
seeing her playing in the sand down by the edge of the water.
I turned to talk to her older sister, and when I looked back,
she was gone.

Fortunately, in her course of play,
she had just wandered up the beach out of view,
but both of us were panicked and terrified
when she became lost and separated from us.
We both felt joy when we finally found each other,
with tears streaming down her face from being scared.

Losing something, especially something important to us, or losing someone,
can be frustrating, scary and exasperating.

Yet the relief and joy we feel when we locate what was lost
is rewarding on it's own.

That's the message on the surface we get from Jesus this week
as he shares two parables in our gospel lesson this morning.

We have two stories of of something being lost, searched for and found,
followed by joyous celebration.

While we may rejoice when we find that wayward item or person,
how often do we actively celebrate?

Yet that's what both our protagonists do in our parables today.

But like all parables, we have some twists in the plot to examine.

Jesus shares these stories in response to “grumblings”

from the Pharisees that are in the crowd around him.

They are grumbling that not only does he welcome “sinners,”

he actually seeks them out to dine with, to share table fellowship with.

We often think of the Pharisees as the bad guys in many of the gospel stories,

but these were men that Jesus did not always shun or avoid.

He also ate with them from time to time.

They were interested in what he had to say,

and sometimes warned him of dangerous situations

he was headed for

at the hands of the priests and Sadducees.

They were the scholars of the religious arena in ancient Palestine,

the seminary professors of the day,

the experts in interpreting the law.

However, in their efforts to translate the 600 odd laws of the Torah

into practical do's and don'ts for the common folk,

they also created categories of those who were clean or pure,
and those who were unclean, or sinners.

Their conception of sin was quite different from ours.

A “sinner” to them was anyone who was not Jewish,
who did not follow their interpretation
of all 617 Torah laws to the letter.

So if any of you wear cotton/polyester blends,
eat shellfish, catfish or pig products,
have ever touched a football,

please see me after the service and we’ll discuss your sinful ways.

In order to stay pure, one had to keep oneself insulated
from those who were deemed to be sinners and unclean.

One possible Hebrew root word for the term Pharisee
is actually the verb for “to separate.”

They can’t understand how a teacher, a rabbi like Jesus,
could possibly set such a bad example

by intentionally defiling himself mixing with these “sinners.”

Yet that’s exactly what Jesus seems to go out of his way to do.

Which begs the question, why?

Why intentionally risk the ire of the religious elite of his day
to share the company of society’s outcasts.

It comes down to perspective.

Their perspective was to keep the bad apples out,
in order that they didn't tarnish the good apples.

His perspective was to make all the apples good apples,
so none would be discarded.

He knew the joy of finding the lost, of seeing the value in each person.

He welcomed them into his company
the same as he would welcome the most notable figure,
perhaps even more so.

In the parable of the lost sheep, he makes a pretty radical statement.

The shepherd abandons the 99 sheep to seek after the one who was lost.

Upon finding that sheep, he literally carries it to safety.

The joy in finding that sheep that was lost was so great
he hosted a celebration to recognize the relief and elation he felt.

Yet it could be considered problematic that he left the 99
to the dangers of the wild,
exposed to injury and predators and the many other dangers faced there.

If we take a close look at the story,
we are never told that the shepherd ever returns to those pious sheep.

He returns home with the lost sheep to party.

We're never told the fate of the 99.

Which considering that his primary audience for these parables
is the grumbling Pharisees, there are clear possible implications for them.

In their pious determination of who's in and who's out,
 perhaps they themselves aren't so secure in their own salvation.
 Perhaps the one sheep is not really the lost one.
 Maybe it's the 99 who need found,
 or need to find their way back to salvation.

Now I also don't want to overly minimize this conception of the term "sinner."

There were certainly those around the table with Jesus who had gone astray,
 had made bad decisions in their life.

Tax collectors who cheated and defrauded others.

Prostitutes who preyed on the lusts of others for personal gain.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees

is that making a wrong choice doesn't exclude you from the table.

Being "damaged goods",

being outcast actually assures your seat at the table.

All 100 sheep made bad choices I'm sure,

it's just the 99's choices didn't cost them their place in society

or their place at society's table.

So are we more like the one or the 99?

Do we have a preference who comes through those doors or sits in the pew next to us?

Would we prefer nice young couples more like us

or those who are outcast like the one who got lost and needed found?

I'd like to close today with a little story a friend from my home church

shared on Facebook his week.

The pastor says they sit front and center. The gay boys.

Sometimes they hold hands.

And some folks have said he should address the issue.

But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say.

And then there's the man who sneaks in the back door. Fresh off the street.

After the service starts. And leaves before benediction.

The people sitting close complain about how bad he smells.

Of beer and smoke and sweat.

But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say.

And then there's the young mama who wears dirty skin

and lets her four children come in and eat all the donuts

and drink all the watered-down juice.

Some church staff say they "...eat like little pigs.

Like they haven't eaten in weeks."

While the mama just stands there and lets them.

And the elders say something must be done and said.

But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say.

And there's the that woman sitting among the faithful.

And everybody knows her.

She sits with a painted-up face, cheap perfume,

and a broken heart.

And those who sit close, well,
they all treat her for what they think she is.

And at the last staff meeting, her name came up.

Something must be done about her.

But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say.

The pastor is a good man. Holy and just.

And he wants to do the "right and loving" thing.

And he wants to "look like Jesus".

And he asks me if I have any thoughts on anything he could say.

Yes, sweet Pastor. I do. Start with this and say it Louder than any other words:

"Welcome to Church.

This is a place of love and hope and safety and forgiveness.

We will be food for the hungry.

Living water for the thirsty.

We are so glad you are here. You are invited. You are loved.

Come on in—we've been waiting on you.

Welcome here. We are the church."

Say that. To the called and to the called-out.

To the leaders and the greeters. To the dirty and the clean.

We are all the same. We are.

May we blow the dust of religion out of our souls and choose affection instead.

May our words and actions and reactions be a sanctuary for all.

Jesus broke many laws to love. So, Jesus, be our voice.

Be the only words we should ever speak.

Is that who we are?

Do we seek those who are really lost, or hope we only find those who are a good fit?

Let's be truly honest with ourselves and really reflect

if we are being the shepherds we are called to be,

seeking and welcoming the lost sheep in the wilderness around us.

What do we really feel inside,

not the smiling friendly face we wear for everyone to see.?

Or do we still harbor feelings and attitudes like the 99 that the shepherd abandons?

Today and in the coming week,

I hope we can spend some time thinking about how we really feel,

and how we can make efforts to become more the church

that truly is a place of refuge and respite

for all those lost sheep in the wilderness of our world. Amen.