

## Seeking and Finding

1 Timothy 1:12-17      Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 15:1-10      September 11, 2016      Pentecost 17C

Last Sunday at lunch after worship, some of us were discussing how pop or rock music concerts feature a name performer, a headliner, but they begin with opening acts. These front acts are often lesser-known, maybe less-experienced bands who are good in their own right, but who are there to set the stage for the star. Their music peps up the audience, and sets the tone, so that when the star comes out, everybody will as ready as they can be to enjoy the great one's performance. Sometimes these opening acts can be really good in themselves, but they never, never, outshine the star.

Luke 15 is like a concert in that way. Luke puts together two brief parables of Jesus, both about seeking, finding, and rejoicing, as front acts, to set the audience up for the great and wonderful climax—the story of the Prodigal Son. Last Spring, on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, the lectionary Gospel dealt with this very same chapter, and emphasized the story of the Prodigal Son. Today, the lectionary has us just look at the opening acts—the two parables that precede and introduce the Prodigal Son. That's good—they don't get lost in the shuffle that way. And since this sermon's about finding what's lost, we wouldn't want that to happen.

So let's set the stage. Remember how Jesus healed a bent-over woman on the Sabbath, and got scolded for it? Remember how Jesus was dining with Pharisees, and tried to change their perspectives and enlarge their visions about who are on God's guest list? Well, today, the Pharisees were grumbling again because Jesus kept coloring outside their boxes. Sinners and tax collectors were gathering around Jesus and this offended the properly religious. "This man is friendly with sinners and tax collectors. He even eats with them," they said. Remember the old clichés, "Birds of a feather flock together" and "You can tell a man by the company he keeps?" Adults would use those clichés to warn children not to hang out with questionable or disreputable kids, those "from the wrong side of the tracks." Well, they didn't have any railroad tracks in Jesus' day, but there were definitely people on the wrong side. The sinners that the Pharisees were talking about were the hard-core sinners—people who ignored the laws, for the most part—the kind our parents told us to steer clear of. And the tax collectors were agents who collected taxes for the Romans—the hated oppressors, traitors to their own kin.

An interesting question to ask *isn't* "Why was Jesus hanging around with tax collectors and sinners"—the lost—but rather, "Why were the tax collectors and sinners hanging around with Jesus?" Why?

When somebody comes to the church, poor, ragtag, dirty, I try to respond compassionately, but I also have this suspicious edge. Are they being honest, or feeding me a well-rehearsed line? Am I going to end up feeding an addiction to alcohol or drugs? If I help them, will they try to become “frequent flyers?” Even, might they be dangerous or abusive if I say no? I try not to act judgmentally, but it’s hard. Jesus, on the other hand, extended gracious love to those who came to him in need. He didn’t pretend that sinners weren’t sinners. He would say, “Go, and sin no more.” He would affirm their faith. “Your faith has made you well.” If our DVD movie on the Gospel of Matthew was right, he would smile and embrace them. He would look beyond the sin and see the human need; and more important, he would see the person, no matter how screwed up his or her life might be, as a beloved, though lost, child of God.

So—how could Jesus communicate that to people who were also lost, but didn’t know they were lost? The good people? People a lot like us? Jesus did what he loved to do. He told some good stories, trying to achieve that “aha!” moment; that new understanding; that new and liberating way of seeing things. Remember—Jesus didn’t tell this story to the tax collectors and habitual sinners to make them feel good. He told it to the good people—people like us—to teach something about ourselves and about God.

The first story was about a shepherd—most people in Jesus’ time and place saw sheep and shepherds every day. Shepherds would keep their sheep in sheepfolds, many right next to their houses in the villages for safety from predators and thieves, and lead them through the village out into the pasturelands to feed during the day—and then lead them back to their pen at night. The villagers would see sheep being led to the market. They would see them dotting the hillsides around the town. So one day, Jesus said, a shepherd led his flock out to pasture, but as the day grew long, he would count them for the trip back—and no, he wouldn’t fall asleep doing it—96, 97, 98, 99...Oops. Who is missing? Yes. It’s Tanglehorn, that rascal. So he leaves the 99 in safety and goes hunting in the ravines near the pasture. He looks, and looks, and looks. The sun is getting low, nearly to the hilltops, when, there he is, silly Tanglehorn, bleating in the dark shadow, stuck in a thicket. The shepherd grabs up the sheep, and instead of just rudely tossing it over to the rest of the flock, he carries it on his shoulders. He carries Tanglehorn, and leads the other sheep home. When all are safe, this shepherd is so happy that he rescued the missing lamb that he invites his neighbors over for a party. They eat, drink, and laugh together, celebrating that the sheep who was lost is now found.

The second parable is about a woman who loses a coin. Today, people drop coins all the time and don’t even bother to reach down and pick them up. But back then, brides were given a dowry by their parents when they were wed. Sometimes the coins of the dowry were woven into a decorative

headband, and those large silver or gold coins would both be her savings account and her jewelry. If that were the case, no wonder was it that when she noticed a missing coin from the ten, she would sweep, and get down on the floor, and look in every nook and cranny for that tenth of her dowry. It *has* to be here somewhere...it just *has* to! What's that glint? Oh, thank you, God! And the woman, like the shepherd, throws an impromptu party for her neighbors, laughing and singing and joking, in her great relief that what was lost was now found.

You can see how these stories lead Jesus right into the story of the Prodigal Son—when it wasn't *what* was lost but *who* was lost that mattered; when it wasn't a day that was interrupted, but months, maybe years. And just like the other two stories, the appropriate response of the waiting father was to welcome his lost son home with a party.

It's easy to think that there are just two kinds of people—sinners and righteous; lost and found. But I think Jesus was telling the righteous people, those who were loyal to God, that God not only sought out to save the lost, the sinners, but God wanted to reach out to the lost part of them—and us—too.

I like what David Lose, a Lutheran seminary president says. "Most of us try very hard to be good Christians and to do the right thing, and no amount of convincing us we're really filthy sinners and then assuring us that God forgives us anyway is going to make much of a difference to our self-conception or behavior.

But though we may be righteous in this sense, might we also be lost?

Might the parents who want their children to succeed so much that they wrap their whole lives around hockey games and dance recitals be lost?

Might the career minded man or woman who has made moving up the ladder the one and only priority be lost?

Might the folks who work jobs they hate just to give their family things they never had be lost?

Might the senior who has a great pension plan but little sense of meaning since retirement be lost?

Might the teen who works so hard to be perfect and who is willing to do just about anything to fit in be lost?

Might the earnest Christian who is constantly asking whether people have accepted Jesus into their hearts be lost?

Might...? Well, you get the picture.”<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

In other words, we all have times in our lives when we are a little bit lost; when we are so distracted that we don't notice God's love for us. God searches for us, too. And God celebrates when we come home.

That's the marvelous thing about these stories—what they say about God. God isn't expecting us to toe the line and be perfect in every way before God allows us into a relationship. No, God is seeking us out; God is like the shepherd scrambling in the ditches; God is like the woman down on her knees scrambling for the coin; God is like the father, waiting out on the lane, wishing, wanting so see his son alive. God is waiting to throw a party, sweeping us all up in his grace, his mercy and his love. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, "Lost," "Dear Working Preacher," Monday, September 09, 2013, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).