

Finding The Lost

Luke 15:1-10

Today is the 21st anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. On that horrible morning, a group of terrorists flew commercial jets into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon. A fourth plane was high above Pennsylvania, on a path toward Washington, DC, when it was brought down by its brave passengers.

That distance, though, such that many of the college students weren't even born yet when it occurred, means that it can be explored in movies and TV without the immediate emotions taking over. One of the most recent movies about 9/11 and its aftermath is *Worth*. The film is based on the story of Kenneth Feinberg, who was appointed the special master of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, and his team. The challenges they face are finding out who the victims of the attack were, who their family members are, and getting a group that varies from illegal immigrant janitors to CEO's to all agree on what their lives were worth. Feinberg, who had experience working with asbestos and Agent Orange claims, comes up with a formula based on actuarial tables and all of the different bits of information about people's lives. His previous work, though, blinds him to fact that the emotions of those left behind are still raw, and that no one wants to be seen or to see their loved ones as merely numbers. It's only once he sees the victims and their families as people that he's able to convince them to sign on to the settlement. It's only when he sees them as people, lost in their grief, that he can help them find closure.

Luke 15 is sometimes known as the lost chapter of Luke, because of the theme of the parables in

it. Today we hear the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Back in the spring, during Lent, we heard the parable of the lost son, or prodigal son. These tales of lostness make two important points. First, the lost are a high priority, worth whatever effort it takes to find them, even if it means leaving the ninety nine behind to find the one. Secondly, when the lost are found, they deserve to be celebrated.

Jesus surrounds himself with the lost. As today's Gospel lesson begins, the tax collectors and "sinners" are drawing near to hear Jesus. They are the ones who know that they are lost, the outcasts from society, who can find no way to justify themselves in terms of the Law. But Jesus is also surrounded by the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious leaders who know that they're not lost. They know every letter of the law, know everything about God. And they know that God would never be found among these lost people. In fact, the Pharisees said that "there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God."

That's the context these parables are told in. Tax collectors and sinners are gathering to hear Jesus, and the Pharisees are complaining. They're grumbling. They're murmuring. They don't like what Jesus is doing.

Jesus handles this like he usually does. He teaches. He teaches in parables, in stories. The main characters in each story, the people who Jesus asked his hearers to identify with, wouldn't have been the kind of people the Pharisees commonly thought of, though. The Pharisees might be able to quote all the Old Testament passages where God or his servants are described as shepherds, but they would

never have thought of themselves as smelly, simple shepherds. And heaven forbid they think of themselves as a woman cleaning house!

Those images would have made sense to the crowd of tax collectors and sinners drawing near to hear Jesus. When you're down to your last ten coins, losing one of them makes a difference between eating or not eating, and the anxiety from losing it and the joy from finding it are magnified. Although it would have taken a middle-class or well-to-do shepherd to have a flock of a hundred sheep, they recognized the common worker as someone like them, and knew the pain of losing an animal.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost, even those who don't know that they're lost. And it's among the lost where we always find Jesus. In and among the tax-collectors and sinners. Talking to a woman at a well who is lost because of her national identity and her marriage problems. With the blind, the lame, the deaf, the sick, all lost. Jesus seeks the lost all the way to the cross, between the two lost thieves. And the thief who recognizes his lostness, the one who knows that he needs to be found, is the one who gets to hear the rejoicing of heaven firsthand.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote, "You cannot read the Bible without hearing the loud message that God cares for the displaced, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the humble, the needy – in other words, those who know their lostness and who long to be found."

All of those feelings of being lost stem from our being lost in relation to God. Like sheep who stray away from the flock and get themselves lost, we stray from God. We wander off, following our own desires and wants,

listening to other voices instead of the voice of the Good Shepherd, and then find ourselves lost, alone, and unable to find ourselves. Sin causes us to wander, to drift away from God and each other. As St. Augustine wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

And when Jesus finds the lost, He puts them up on his shoulders and carries them home. The image of Jesus as a shepherd carrying a sheep is still one of the most popular images of Jesus, and has been for centuries. We know how lost we can get, and like a sheep who cannot find its way home, like a coin that cannot do anything to get found, we know how dependent we are on the one searching for us. We know what it's like to be lost, and we know the joy of being found.

As God promised in today's Old Testament lesson, "I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak." God fulfilled that promise to send Jesus as the Good Shepherd, to seek the lost and carry them back to the flock with rejoicing.

Jesus points out in the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin that the purpose of his coming into the world is to seek and find the lost. He is not here to judge, but to suffer judgement, to bring mercy, to heal and bind up, and preach the good news of great joy – a Savior has come into the world to save sinners.

We also know the joy of finding things. The joy that you have at finding a twenty dollar bill in your pocket, the joy you have at finding your cell phone after forgetting where you put it, the joy that you have at finding your student ID all

pales before the joy that God has in one who repents. No matter how far we wander, no matter how lost we get, God continues to come to us to carry us back.

God uses us the same way, to send us out to search for the lost. On September 11, 2001 – twenty one years ago this Sunday – Welles Crowther went to work like every other day to his job as an equities trader in the World Trade Center. After the second tower was hit, the one he was in, Welles led everyone he could find down the steps to safety, and then he went back for more. And after leading more people to safety, he went back again, and again, and again, until the tower collapsed. On that day, this talented, athletic, good natured, but in so many ways ordinary person did an extraordinary thing, giving his life to make sure others could live. On that day, God used Welles Crowther to find people who were lost.

This is the Good News of the Good Shepherd: Christ came to find us when we were lost and couldn't find our way back. When you fear that you have wandered far from the fold, Jesus finds you and brings you back. And when you know that you have nothing, absolutely nothing, to offer God, he offers you himself. This has nothing to do with what kind of sheep we've been, how far we've wandered. It has everything to do with the love and mercy of the Good Shepherd. He's the Good Shepherd, and he gives everything to find the lost. The Good Shepherd is with you and before you and in you—and for you. That's a promise we can trust.

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