

Luke 15:1-10

Finding the Lost

“On September 11, 2001 ... [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.”¹

This being the anniversary of 9/11 it seems that a story like this is a good place to begin. It is to be noted that if you were to read the full account of Welles seeking and searching, you would realize that he was finding people who had not been searching for a way out. They stayed in place hoping to be found, likely praying for a rescue. They didn't know how to go about saving themselves. They were like lost sheep needing a shepherd and Welles was that shepherd. He sought them out, brought them to safety, and for those who knew they were safe, there would have been rejoicing. Still there was and is so much grief around that day and in the weeks, months, and even years to follow.

This year, while in New York City, I, and those with me, spent some time at the Reflection Pools that are situated at what would have been the base of the Twin Towers. The grief over the lives lost on that tragic day cannot be escaped as you read names or glide one's hand over the names etched into the metal railings around the pools.

There is not an intention for this to be a direct correlation to the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin that Jesus shared with those coming near to him as he taught on this particular day. But there are themes of loss, of seeking and finding, of judgement by others, and rejoicing.

Let's start with the judgement piece. It came in the first verses, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Those who were likely thought of as the saved, the righteous, the ones closest to getting it right when it comes to God...the Pharisees and scribes... were rather indignant that someone who touted himself as a religious teacher would be eating with those who were not dignified, or seen as one of them. But Jesus, hearing their judgement and seeing their reaction chose to teach them through a story.

Often these two parables have focused on the ones who were lost, and that would be a good way to preach it. There is a lostness to be spoken about. It is most likely that each

one of us has felt lost at some point or another, lost in a store, on a travel, or elsewhere. We can feel lost emotionally in grief, anger, and hatred. We can be lost in illness whether physical or mental and addictions. There is even feeling lost socially when one does not feel like they fit in. And for many of us, including myself, I have been lost spiritually.

I recall just prior to my call to ministry being in a time of feeling completely lost to God. I felt like I had lost my faith. I didn't want to open my Bible or pray. I was resentful because I felt like God had abandoned me. Little did I know that I was lost and didn't know how to be found or that I even needed finding. Yet my being here with you as a minister tells you that God found me. Turns out big time! God continued to search for me when I lost my way, just like Welles continued to search for those who didn't know how to leave the South Tower.

People get lost in many ways. Often I hear stories from those who come to the door of St. Andrew's, and they are stories of feeling lost. They don't know how to find their way out of homelessness, addictions, and abuse. Their family backgrounds are filled with pain and death. At times I imagine where would Jesus be on any given Sunday, with us in the Sanctuary or with those who are sitting on the fire escape. Those who are lost.

These two parables answer that question. It is not that Jesus doesn't want us to be here in worship, but it is about our hearts. Jesus demonstrated that God favours those who are on the margins, who are lost, who are hungry, sick, or in prison. It is not really cut and dry either. We are all loved by God, but the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin are stories about the lengths that God will go to in order to find those who are lost.

They are stories about God's loves that pursues those who are lost, even if they don't know they are. These parables are about welcome and hospitality, belonging, and community. So often it is much easier to judge and whisper to our neighbour, or sit in fear than and, as the Pharisees and scribes did, to judge not only those who were lost and finding a welcome with Jesus, but to judge Jesus' actions as well.

Jesus was the one who was letting the riff raff come near to listen to him. He was not shoeing them away as might have been appropriate in their eyes. Tax collectors and sinners. Does Jesus not realize what it looks like when you sit with the likes of them?

I recall a lunch here at the church when, as often happens, the door bell rang. I was pretty sure it would be someone asking for bus fare. It is usually not a bother for me as it gives me opportunity to connect with those who come to the door and show a little compassion and hospitality. It is not even close to the radical welcome that God is calling us to but at least I feel like we are not ignoring those God has here with us. Well as I stood up to leave, I was looked straight in the eye and told, "you should not be doing that!" It was clear that this person saw no value in those who were lost. It might be though that not only were the people on the street lost, but so was the person making the that statement.

Which brings me to another way to approach these parables. The stories in most Bibles are labeled with the heading, "The Parable of the Lost Sheep" and "The Parable of the Lost Coin" so we think about what was lost. We sit beside Jesus and imagine being the

ones who find others, and we are called to that. We are called to live in a way that offers Jesus to others, shares our faith, our lives, our hope. We very seldom perceive ourselves as one of the Pharisees or scribes and yet, each time we judge who comes into our sanctuary or other places we frequent, we judge because somehow, they don't fit our idea of who is a Christian and who is not, who belongs, and who doesn't, who is worth our while and who is not, it is then that we are face with the fact that Jesus was telling this story to teach those who thought they had this God thing right that they were not so right. In fact, they were just as lost as the sheep and the coin.

The beauty is that God is seeking all. God risks the 99 for the 1. Which makes no economic or reasonable sense. God will turn on lights, sweep the house, search carefully until you and I and every other lost person is found, expending more time and energy than seems reasonable. God is like the parent frantically searching for a lost child, whether lost in a store, or lost in the power of addiction or illness. God is that rather than a harsh, dictator-like ruler that has often been the dominant image of God.

There is a crux. God seeks us to restore us, but we have to respond. This is what repentance is about. It is about our acceptance that we have been found, even when we didn't know we were lost until, faced with God's love and grace, we see that we needed to be restored. It is why you can't force anyone to believe in God, or make them believe in God. Until an individual or even a community of faith realizes that they were lost and in need of finding, then they will not know or accept that God is filled with love for them, wants to restore them to wholeness in community with others, and we respond to that love and grace.

There is one more piece to this though! At the end of each of these parables we hear about the joy that will be in heaven over finding what has been lost. We are called to be a joyful and rejoicing community of believers. We are to celebrate each other and, even more so, those who come to us needing community and assurance that they have value. So today rejoice in the Lord, rejoice! Pay attention to who is lost, whether it be you or another. Show compassion, kindness, grace, and welcome hospitality. Let God find others through our love as we rejoice together for God's presence, persistence, and grace in seeking the lost. Amen.