

“Joy in Finding the Lost”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church — Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 15: 1-10

When was the last time you lost something? Last week? Yesterday? This morning? It's so easy to set something down in your house, in your car, in your office, and then you can spend hours searching for it later. The most common thing for me to do is to set something down, and then a magazine or paper gets places over top of it. I keep retracing my steps to find my wallet or keys or that important slip of paper, and when I finally find it, I'm more dumbfounded than I am thankful!

When was the last time you were lost? Now, if I ask the men in the congregation this question, the only way I would get an honest answer would be if we were in a room all together, without any possibility our spouses or the other ladies would see our responses. Us men are notorious for not asking for directions, and I am no different. During our sabbatical journeys, we really didn't get lost at any point. Well, except once . . .

We had arrived in Paris from London, and after taking the subway from the train station, we got off at the stop where our apartment was on the map. I had a Google Maps print out of the location, and it was an intersection that had six different streets coming together in one place. After walking around a bit to figure out which street was ours, we then tried to ascertain the location of our apartment. We were where we thought we were supposed to be, but there was no one there to meet us, as had been arranged via email communications. All of the sudden, I started to feel very lost and anxious, and we were all very tired and hot.

This is when, as a man, you are grateful for marrying a woman who is not afraid to ask for help. Debbie noticed a man in a bookstore along the street, who could tell we were lost. She approached him and asked if he spoke English. He did, and was able, through the phone numbers we had in hand, to speak with the rental agency and make certain we were in the right place. Sure enough, within five minutes, a representative was there letting us in. We were very much like lost sheep who had been rescued by the shepherd.

To find something which was lost, or to be found after feeling lost yourself, it truly causes joy and thanksgiving. You want to share your good news with those around you. You want to tell strangers about your good fortune. You feel as if you have been granted an undeserved blessing, and promise not to take it for granted. Why? Because that something or someone who was lost was gone for good, as far as you

knew. But when that something or someone is found, a part of your life is restored to wholeness, and you rejoice.

It's no wonder, then, why it is easy for us to relate to these two parables of Jesus. Jesus tells us that just as a shepherd searches for the one lost sheep out of a hundred and finds it and rejoices, so too does God rejoice when just one sinner repents than a hundred righteous persons. Or that just as a woman searches for the coin she had lost in her house, and finally finds it and rejoices with her friends and neighbors, so too does God rejoice with all in heaven over the one man or woman who becomes a believer in the Lord. The lost soul, the rebellious child, the lifelong criminal or bad seed — these are the ones whom Jesus is saying the Lord rejoices over when they have been found by the gospel of love.

That's always the part of the gospel we have trouble with. We weren't the only ones. The Pharisees and the scribes were also having a hard time with Jesus' message. They were the ones who abided by the rules of the law. They followed a strict diet and a daily regimen of study, prayer, and discipline, with the hope that the Jewish people would see them as models of faithful living, and attempt to follow in their footsteps. These notions of Jesus that God did not seek them out, but rather the corrupt and despised of society — well, it caused them to grumble and eventually to conspire against him in Jerusalem.

We're pretty good at grumbling against God when it comes to this sort of thing. This kind of message doesn't make sense to us. It's not logical at all. We try and place ourselves in the one lost sheep or lost coin category, when in fact we know deep down that we are the 99 other sheep or the other coins in the woman's purse. As one commentator has put it, "Typically, we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others, but [these] parables call for us to celebrate with God because God has been merciful not only to us but to others also, even to those we would not otherwise have accepted into our fellowship"

(New Interpreter's Bible, Vol.9, p.298).

But in many respects, these parables are about more than being the lost who is found. You will notice that Jesus begins the first parable by saying, "Which one of you . . ." By doing that, Jesus doesn't place us in the role of the sheep. He puts us in the shoes of the shepherd. Which one of you, when you have lost something or someone valuable, searches day and night, without delay, until you finally find what you are looking for. The parable teaches us both about who God is and about who we are to become. God will never stop looking for the lost, and when they are found there will be a huge party in heaven. Likewise, we are to assist in this endeavor, not to sit in the corner and grumble against God, or to hope we are the one to be found. Rather, we are to search out and find the lost, in order that there might be rejoicing in heaven.

Do we view our ministry at John Knox as searching out the lost and bringing them into a place of safety in the arms of the good shepherd? When a community group uses our facility for a support group meeting or children's activity, do we view it as rent which is paid and critiquing the building's condition when they are done, or do we view it as a means of embracing those who might feel lost and being welcomed by the shepherd's love? When a new family walks through our doors on a Sunday, do we view them as potential members who might add to our numbers, or do we view them as individuals seeking something which has been missing in their lives, and who are yearning to learn and belong? When we evaluate our programs, our budgets, our ministry as a congregation, are we more concerned about our own interests, or are we more concerned about how our time, talent, and treasure might help seek those who are lost and are yearning to be found by God's love in Jesus Christ?

How are you feeling today? Are you feeling tired and stressed, with nothing left in your tank to help your neighbor? Are you lost and hopeless, feeling like you will never find that place called home? Are you satisfied and content, and not wanting to risk finding a lost brother or sister, knowing that could mean pain, heartache, and discontent?

Now, how does it make you feel to know that God has been searching for you? God has been looking and looking and looking, never giving up his search, and refusing to give up hope. How does it feel to know that despite your doubts, your hopelessness and your worries, you are being found – right now, right this moment? How does it change your perspective that someone loves you to such a degree that he will do everything in his power and love to find you? “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

How does it feel to be found? What will you do now that you have been found? Who will you help so they might be found? How will you be changed now that you have been found?

Thanks be to God for the shepherd who never gives up on the lost sheep. Amen.