

“Lost and Found”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 15: 1-10

So, I have always been someone who believed in transparency and honesty, especially when you're getting to know someone for the first time. And with some of you here for the first time as visitors and guests with us today, I feel it's only fair that I give you a full and honest impression of who I am, so that there is no confusion or misunderstanding later.

I tend to be someone who likes to have things planned out and organized. Just a little.

One of the ways that can manifest itself is planning ahead for trips. If I'm going somewhere I've never been before, I will look at maps – online or old-fashioned paper maps – to get a visual picture in my head of the intended route. I was the kid who, on long road trips with my family, would pull out one of these (hold up a road atlas) and just study maps and the roads in different parts of the country. I would quiz my mom and dad about which route we were taking and estimate in my head how much longer it would take us to get there. I know – I was a geek. I'm so glad I met Debbie!

Hardly any of us use these paper maps anymore, do we? Most of us will plug an address into our phone, start the directions, and let some voice tell us where to turn and how much longer it will be until we make the next turn. I used to scoff at people who always did that. In my best grumpy old man voice, I'd think, “Why doesn't anyone use maps anymore? Those phones won't do you much good when you don't have cell service somewhere.”

But you know what? Now, I'm a convert. With this new van we bought in February, it's got Apple Play on the audio system. So, when you plug in the destination on your phone and hit “go” for the directions, it shows up on the screen and Siri talks you through every turn. I used it this weekend when I went to Shelburn, Indiana, for Taylor and Haleigh Johnson's wedding. Never got lost and it got me there on-time. I felt like I did the first time I took an airline flight and they had just come out with those monitors on the seatbacks, and you could track by GPS where the plane was throughout the flight. In my own car! I know – I'm a geek.

I think the biggest reason I am over-planned and organized when it comes to trips and maps is because I don't want to become lost. I want to find my way to the destination without any disruptions or delays. I don't want to be embarrassed or cause inconvenience to those who are expecting me if I can't get there by the time I said I would be there.

Being lost usually leads me to feel afraid or uncertain or lonely. And I will do whatever I can to preclude that feeling.

Melissa Earley writes: *On May 8, Amanda Eller went on what was to be a short hike on a familiar trail in the Makawao forest preserve on Maui. She left her water, phone, and wallet in her car. She didn't know she'd get lost. We don't plan to get lost.*

After a rest off the trail, Eller started hiking again and got turned around. Following her gut instinct led her deeper into the forest rather than back to the trail. On day three, she fell off of a cliff and fractured her leg. The next day she lost her shoes in a flood. Official searchers suspended their work on May 12, 72 hours after the search for Eller began.

But volunteers persisted. They searched ravines, caves, and pools. They climbed, rappelled, hiked, and dove. They killed boars and searched their intestines for human remains. The man coordinating the search was fired from his job for missing work. Eller's family posted a reward and hired a helicopter. On May 25, day 17 of Eller's ordeal, the volunteer searchers' persistence paid off. Helicopter rescuers spotted her seven miles from the central search area. She was injured, dehydrated, and alive (*Christian Century*, August 28, 2019: 19).

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.

Earley continues: *Todd was a 15-year-old runaway who worshiped at the church where United Methodist bishop Karen Oliveto was once pastor. She tells the story of Todd's absence from church for several weeks. The people were worried; many had firsthand experience of the dangers for a teenager living on the streets. They did everything they could to find him.*

One Sunday, Oliveto looked up and saw Todd in his wrinkled shirt and tie, crumpled from being at the bottom of his backpack. Overjoyed, she greeted him with a big hug.

"I've missed you," she said.

"You missed me?" Todd replied. "No one ever noticed when I was gone, ever."

When we're lost we want to know that someone is looking. In Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the shepherd and the woman search until they find what was lost. They don't search until it grows dark, too dangerous to continue, or too hard to see. They don't search until, bone tired and bleary eyed, they figure that the sheep has fallen off a cliff or the coin was pinched by a visiting neighbor. They search until the sheep is safely back with the flock and the coin is pressed in the hand of the woman. The story presumes that what was lost can be found (ibid).

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 instead God sought out 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 sandals 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.

You know, I believe that's a big part of what we're embarking on today as a congregation with our Formative Learning Experience in the year ahead. Some of us may be here wondering what's next in our life, unsure about where God is leading us. Some of us may be here because we love seeing familiar faces or meeting new people, but we're not feeling that deep spiritual connection with God that it seems our neighbor has. Some of us may be here fully present and engaged in God's call on our life, and we are discerning where the Spirit is leading us next. Some of us may feel very lost. Some of us may be wanting help finding and welcoming the lost.

One way as a congregation that we begin to embark on this call to find the lost is that we draw closer to one another – in conversation, in relationship, in discipleship. As we're invited today to play and learn and grow in our understanding of each other, we will begin to open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to see our sister or brother in Christ as God sees him or her. How can we expect to be the Body of Christ if we do not see one another where we truly are? How can we expect to be found if we do not honestly admit the areas in which we are feeling lost? My prayer is that this year will allow us the opportunity to grow and stretch ourselves, both individually and as a community, so that we all might experience the redemptive, restorative welcome and love that comes from being found.

One last thing about the lost and found. Earley writes: *Not everything that is lost can be found. When a partner, parent, or friend dies we keep looking for them. We expect them to be at the dinner table. We listen for their car to pull into the garage. We look for them at the places we used to go together – favorite restaurants, our usual grocery store. Moments of relief when we forget they are gone turn to reproaches when we remember that they are gone for good. One widow told me the relief she felt in moving: "I still miss him, but at least I don't look for him all the time."*

Paul Anderson, a retired 42-year veteran of the National Parks Service, says that suspending a search is "one of the most gut-wrenching experiences you could ever go through." But sometimes suspending the search is the best thing we can do. An active search consumes us. Every other facet of life comes second, third, or fourth to finding what's missing. Suspending the search creates its own grief. But it also makes space to imagine a different future.

For our own well-being, we may need to stop searching for lost loved ones. But God doesn't stop. We're the emergency responders, and God is the volunteer search party (ibid).

Searching for the lost can be exhausting and consuming. And sometimes, for our well-being, we need to suspend the search. But God never gives up – on the lost, on the world, on us. I am forever grateful for that promise of faith. I hope you are, as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.