

Luke 15:1-10

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Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons (who need no repentance)(?). 8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

This is the word of God....thanks be to God.

1 Tim 2:1-7          208 NT

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—<sup>2</sup> for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. <sup>3</sup>This is good, and pleases God our Savior, <sup>4</sup>who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. <sup>5</sup>For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time. <sup>7</sup>And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles.

### ***“Where the Lost Things Are”***

I don't probably have to tell most of you, but Mike and I really had the most marvelous time with our grandson visiting us last weekend. Alex did not stay long, but even in his 2 days of visiting, we found ourselves remembering what joy, simple, pure joy is all about. It was great. Through his 20 mo old eyes, we rediscovered the simple beauty of the movements of a bird, the way wind parts bangs on your forehead, the mystery in water falling in a fountain, the sweetness of a ripe, yellow banana...and well, it lifted our souls. We smiled so much our faces hurt.

In those two days, we had simple adventures that we've been pleasantly reliving since. One adventure *involved a yellow, plastic ball, also known as a “ba”, with little holes in it about the size of a toddler's fingers. You see, the ball came with the slide that Mike and I got for Alex. The slide is about 2 feet tall, and it has a basketball hoop mounted on its side...sort of a two in one toy. Alex understood the concept of putting the ball in the slide's hoop, but he much preferred to just carry the ball. Once in a while, upon urging, he'd roll the ball to one of us, or give it a heave, but mostly, he wanted to just carry it from room to room. His chest would puff out, and he'd say, “ba, ba, ba”, as he'd go. When his mother would pry it out of his hands long enough for him to eat lunch or the like, his little finger would point to the ball, and he'd give her an inquisitive look, and she'd reassure him he could play with it when he was done. Such fun. But then it happened. We don't really know how, but the ball came up missing. We were all just sitting there talking with Alex playing in our midst, and suddenly we were aware that Alex was wandering, saying, “ba?, ba?, ba?” He was calling for it. But the yellow ball did not answer. It was lost. We looked under couches and chairs, bookshelves, tables...we looked outside, in his suitcase...its location truly became a mystery. Finally, Alex discovered it, in a cranny behind our entertainment center, wedged aside the unused rowing machine and sitting among some dust bunnies. I was able, not easily, to reach it, rescue the yellow ball, and give it back to Alex. Pure joy was on his face. He squealed and snatched it from me; we cheered and clapped, and he toddled off once again, saying, “ba, ba” under his breath.*

You know, that's what these parables are about, joy, simple joy! They're about the joy that God feels when one of God's children returns into relationship, when one who has somehow found themselves feeling outside of God's care and reach, is pulled back or pulled out of the hole they're in!"<sup>1</sup> They're about the joy that God receives when anyone... anyone... anyone who has experienced lostness is found.

So they're not exclusive to a non or not-yet Christians. The persons returned to relationship with God are not necessarily the unchurched or unbelieving, the people 'out there', the atheists, the naysayers, the folks beyond the fold. NO, if you notice, the lost lamb in the first parable belonged to the shepherd's flock from the very beginning of the story — it was HIS lamb. Likewise, the coin in the second parable belonged to the woman before she loses it; the coin is one of her very own. These are parables simply regard lostness...lostness on the inside...which is not exclusive to non or not-yet Christians.<sup>2</sup>

Lostness happens to everyone. And it occurs repetitively, over and over again. It is not, as Debbie Thomas says, "*a blasphemous aberration.*"<sup>3</sup> No, "*it's part and parcel of the life of faith*". It can happen whenever we find ourselves in a strange, frightening place with no markers to guide us home. We may be in church when we lose our sense of belonging, our capacity to trust, our experience of God's presence. We may lose our will to persevere, our inner drive to discern right from wrong. Maybe when we read Scripture or pray, we feel empty. When we take communion we may feel confused or bored. Illness may have descended upon our lives and we've come to think God is not so good after all. The sudden death of a loved one may leave us reeling. We may experience lostness when our marriages fall apart or our children make decisions which break our hearts. We may get lost in the throws of addiction, anxiety, lust, anger, unforgiveness, or bitterness.

Yes, lostness is a part of everyone's lives, anyone's lives, and our God contends with genuine stakes, genuine stakes before being filled to the brim with joy in finding us. God searches, seeks, God persists, God wanders over hills and valleys looking for us. This means

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose. "*Pentecost 17 C: Joy!*" In: "In the Meantime". <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-17-c-joy/>. (accessed 9-16-16).

<sup>2</sup>Debbie Thomas. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Debbie Thomas.

that God doesn't just hang out in the fold with the ninety-nine insiders. God isn't only curled up on her couch polishing the nine coins she's already sure of. God is where the lost things are. God is where lostness is most prevalent, in the darkness of the wilderness, in the emptiness of the night, in the deafening quietness of the cemetery, or the noisiness of the ER or the remotest corner of the unemployment office. God is where the "search is at its fiercest".<sup>4</sup>

So brothers and sisters, when we feel we are lost, we need to quit running. We need stop, be still, and let God's arms embrace us. Priest Henri Nouwen has said, "*For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—to pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair. Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not 'How am I to find God?' but 'How am I to let myself be found by God?'...God is always there looking for me, finding me, and longing to bring me home.*"<sup>5</sup>

Yes, as hard as it might be, we need let God find us when we're lost. We need do no more, except to let down our guard and consent to being found. Even if we are lost due to sin, the search and rescue by God actually has no dependence on us, on our acts, or our worth. Repentance is important. Of course, it is. It is how we make ourselves right with God. But as near as I can tell, neither the lamb nor the coin repented in order for God to act.<sup>6</sup> No, repentance, gratitude, any response by us, does not take place without God's initiative to seek, find and then rejoice as only God does.

This is what the grumbling Pharisees and Scribes would have done well to hear, nearly 2000 years ago. They were grumbling because Jesus' storytelling accompanied his sharing of a meal with those whom THEY thought impure. They were offended by Jesus' radical hospitality. "He," they thought, "*should have known these people were "not worthy"!*" But, Jesus' message

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<sup>4</sup> Debbie Thomas.

<sup>5</sup> [Henri J.M. Nouwen, \*The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming\* https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/470691-for-most-of-my-life-i-have-struggled-to-find](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/470691-for-most-of-my-life-i-have-struggled-to-find) (accessed 2-22-15).

<sup>6</sup> David Schnasa Jacobsen. "*Commentary on Luke 15:1-10*". [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2959](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2959). (accessed 9-16-16).

was that *“THEY needed to quit grumbling; in fact, to quit worrying about who God was letting into the kingdom and just start enjoying the gift,”*<sup>7</sup> *They needed to let down their guards and enjoy the gift that was extended to include even them in their lostness, not because they deserved it but because it was simply extended to them!”*

NOW...that’s what these parables are about....God’s joy, graciously given us, despite ourselves. But, there is yet another joy, our joy as we are engaged with God in the divine search. God often uses us and will continue to use us to look at the world through the eyes of the shepherd or the woman. God uses us to find others where the lost things are. God uses us to find people who need to be retrieved from behind the entertainment center, from amid the dust bunnies and the unused rowing machine, who need to be brought back to where the family is gathered and will cheer and clap at their arrival.

So, let’s look around. Who is it that is lonely and feeling abandoned? Who is feeling guilty and is hiding from God? Who sees themselves as unworthy? Who is held captive by fear? Who has lost sight of their life’s purpose? Who is in the depths of depression or grief? Who feels left out because they are different?

*I will close with a story of a person who engaged in God’s “just joyful” work by helping to find another who was lost.*<sup>8</sup> *It is a story about Mary Ann Bird who was born with multiple birth defects: a cleft palate, disfigured face, deformed feet, and deafness in one ear. She, not surprisingly, was bullied horribly in school. The greatest emotional damage occurred each year when the students had to undergo a hearing test. The teacher would call each child forward and ask them to cover one ear and then the other. The teacher would whisper a simple phrase such as, “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes” into their ears. Mary Ann could not hear in one ear and did all she could, including cheating, to minimize attention to this fact, attention which would most certainly result in taunts. Oh, how she hated the “whisper test”. Then one year, it was her beloved teacher, Miss Leonard, who had to give the dreaded test. She called Mary Ann forward and Mary Ann cupped her ear. Mary Ann is quoted as saying, “I*

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<sup>7</sup> John Buchanan. Sermon: “Say it until it Sticks” <http://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2004/0926/04html>. (accessed 9-16-16).

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Long, “Testimony: Talking Ourselves into being Christian”. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass;2004), 85-6.

*waited for those words which God must have put in her mouth, those 7 words that changed my life. Miss Leonard did not say, “the sky is blue” or “you have new shoes.” What she whispered was, “I wish you were my little girl.” (pause)*

Friends, my prayer for you...may you, when you are lost come to know the God who experiences such joy, pure and simple, in finding you. And may you, through the love that you know in that God, bring others to realize this same joy, forever and ever. Amen