

Proper 19 C
I Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10
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Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

Have you ever gotten lost? I'm sure you have—my most recent example was coming back from Methodist Hospital in San Antonio. I carefully headed back the way I had come, as that area is not real familiar to me. The entrance ramp back onto the highway was closed for construction, though, and I began a process of going under overpasses and onto on ramps and back off, with each turn losing more and more what little orientation I'd had. And next thing I knew, I was seeing signs for Sea World, which in case you don't know, isn't anywhere near the road back to Wimberley.

When you're a little kid, getting lost can be downright terrifying. I remember getting lost from my mom and grandmother at Sears at Hancock Center in Austin, when I must have been about 4. I don't know how we got separated, but as I wandered around looking for them, I remember seeing a lot of legs—women's legs sticking out of skirts and dresses. (It was about 1967.) First I hugged the legs of some lady who looked like my mother, from the legs down, but wasn't, and then I approached a mannequin, thinking those might be my mother's legs; fortunately I realized my mistake before I grabbed onto her. I remember the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, and how everything started to look all spinny and dizzy as I kept not finding my mother. I may have started crying, I don't know, but finally some clerk found me, took me down the escalator and to the office, and called out my name over the loudspeaker, and the three of us were reunited.

For a kid to get lost is to lose their very grounding in life. Parents or guardians for children are protection; they are sustenance; and they are identity, making a place where the child can fit into the world. Kids know this instinctively, and to be separated from it is terrifying. They may keep up a brave face while they're lost, but when they see mama or daddy, they'll let down and burst into tears.

We have stories today in scripture that tell about losing and finding, about being lost and being found. They tell us about ourselves and about God, and about the relationship between us, and the way for us to look at that is to look at the characters in the story. What we find when we look at it is that Jesus is telling stories here, stories we call parables, but he's doing so as part of another story, which is the one Luke is telling. Jesus tells these stories about the shepherd and the lost sheep, and the woman and the lost coin, and that's what we think this is about. We forget, though, that there are other characters here too: the people around Jesus, the people listening to his stories. And that cast of characters includes: the tax collectors and sinners, who have come near to listen to Jesus; the Pharisees and scribes, who were grumbling about the tax collectors and sinners coming near to Jesus and how he even ate with them.

It's natural when we hear a story to associate ourselves with a particular character; we often do this without even thinking about it, and it's actually one of the ways a parable works. We hear the story and interpret it from that perspective. Many of us may see ourselves in the lost coin and the lost sheep, lost like a child in a store, waiting for God to call our name on the loudspeaker and come and find us. We know what it's like to feel vulnerable like that, to want protection and assurance and direction

when we don't know what to do with ourselves. We hear these stories as words of hope, hope even for us and the secret ways we know we are lost. And certainly these stories hold that good news for us.

But I think we have to make a detour first, to hear something else too, hear something else first. Remember that our warm and welcoming Jesus has been hammering us all summer in Luke's gospel with upsetting, conflictive speeches—talk of bringing not peace but a sword, of dividing family members from one another, of decent people replaced at the banquet table by riffraff off the street—that's the even larger context for this particular story in Luke, and I believe that apparent contradiction means we need to listen more deeply here.

I'm not sure that we really see ourselves in either the sinners who came to Jesus or the scribes and the Pharisees. In the church we often get the idea that the scribes and Pharisees were bad people, mean-spirited, judging and excluding others for their own personal gain; they were enemies of Jesus. We are not like them, we think. But we probably don't see ourselves in the tax collectors and sinners, either. Tax collectors abused their own people on behalf of the Romans; they took the people's money and skimmed a fat share off the top for themselves. They were traitors to the faith and instruments of oppression in the hands of the occupiers. The people Luke calls sinners may have been more complex; they may have had bad circumstances thrust upon them. But most likely they had made choices for themselves that cut them off from the law of God and from their community.

These were the ones who drew near to listen to Jesus, and these are the ones

with whom he sat down to break bread. To try to listen deeply and hear how offensive this would have been for good temple-going people, one writer used the analogy of Jesus sitting down to dinner today with undocumented immigrants and child molesters. Undocumented immigrants may or may not get your blood up, but I have to tell you that the child molester example offended me to the extent that I wasn't going to use it with you. The thought went through my mind, "Now, that's just going too far. That's too offensive. I don't want anyone to think I have sympathy for child molesters." And I don't, not for their crime. No patience whatsoever. But that very response in me, I believe, is exactly what the scribes and Pharisees of the day were wrestling with in their encounters with Jesus; he was willing to associate with such characters. This is how disruptive and disturbing he was to people of the faith. And I believe that, among other things, this is how disruptive and disturbing he means to be with us.

For Jesus is trying to get us to see the lengths to which God will go to find us. Paul in I Timothy describes himself as having been a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence. He was one of those religious authorities who had been very clear about the lostness of other people. He had helped hunt down Christians and had stood by while they were stoned to death. He saw no association between them and himself. Yet Jesus went so far as to knock Paul down in the middle of the road to Damascus, blinding him with light, and saying, "Paul, why do you persecute me? Get up and go where I tell you to go." And Paul was brought into a home and given food and baptism, and the scales fell from his eyes, and he became the first brilliant Christian thinker, the one who began to help it all make sense for us centuries later through his

letters.

You probably know the movie, "Saving Private Ryan," in which a group of soldiers is sent to retrieve a young private from behind the lines in WWII. His three brothers have already died in the war, and the brass have decided that his mother should not have to risk losing all her sons. The captain, receiving the order and "reflecting on the dangers, observes, 'This Ryan better be worth it. He better go home and cure a disease or invent a longer-lasting lightbulb or something'" (Quoted in *UR Disciplines 2007*, p. 268). This is the part of these parables that makes the least sense to us—the willingness of the seekers to risk what they already have in order to find what they have lost. The woman burns precious oil in her lamp, maybe worth more than the actual value of the coin itself. The shepherd leaves the 99 to go and find the one—no one can be that important. Is the lost one more important than the ones who aren't lost?

Maybe that's not the question. Maybe, if we know God will risk it all to find the lost, the question is, are we among the lost? We want to be found, we like how that sounds, but can we see ourselves as lost, needing God to come looking for us? Paul invites us to say yes to this question, we who have decided to take on Christ's name. For, he tells us, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost" (1:15). This is the whole reason Christ has come to us—because we need finding, because we need to accept the gift of life God is extending to us, laying down the crazy path we've chosen for ourselves. The Pharisees, the tax collectors, the people whom we don't want to

name or sit next to—and us. We need finding. And thanks be to God, we can know that there is no place we can go where God cannot find us.

Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farms (where Habitat for Humanity was born) and author of *The Cotton Patch Gospels*, noted that Jesus said the shepherd searches "until he finds" the sheep. The woman searches for the lost coin "until she finds it". They do not look until they are tired, or until the search gets dangerous or discouraging, or it gets dark and they have to spend precious resources to be able to see. They search until they find. That is how God is with us (Mcjene, DPS, 9/10/07). And it is our job, as God's people, to wait upon this, to look for God to find us. A preacher told a story this week about her son, who "learned to hike through Scouting. He was taught that, should he ever get lost, he was to fight the urge to try to find his own way home but instead, to find a safe spot and sit tight. Then he was to use his standard issue whistle (taken on every hike) to blow signals for searchers to hear. He could trust that his troop (and others, if needed) would be searching for him" (Beth in OR, DPS, 9/10/07).

That's who we are, as the church. People who know we're lost part of the time, a lot of the time, people who know we need finding and who know God is looking. And we know these things standing next to each other as we sing, kneeling next to each other at the table, serving next to each other in the world. "It was [once] asked of the children during a Children's Sermon, 'Would you go after the one lost sheep or stay with the ninety-nine?' To which one boy quickly responded, 'I'd go after the one lost sheep, but I'd take the other ninety-nine with me'" (Proper 19C, 9/16/07,

girardianlectionary.net). That's the church! That's who we are--we're not the 99, back at home, grumbling about the shepherd being out looking for the lost one! We're the sheep who go and help bring other sheep in, because we know how it feels. And oh, the rejoicing there will be in the heart of God when she has finally found us all, when he has brought us all safely home! It'll be a party with friends and neighbors invited, where we'll lay down the fights between us, a party that cost way more than the sheep or the coin, or the two put together. And you never know who else we might see there.