

“Lost and Found”
Luke 15:1–10
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First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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As many of you know, Dana and I have had two German Shepherds for most of our thirty-five years of marriage. We began with one little puppy from the Humane Society in Danville, Virginia. He was about six months old and had been taped into a box and thrown in a dumpster. We had only been married a month, had just moved to Danville, and lived in a rental house owned by a church deacon who lived next door and did not allow dogs inside. But Dana had seen this little guy’s story in the paper on Friday, had a dream about him that night, or so she said, and so on Saturday morning, we had to go see him.

Seeing him led to bringing him home, of course—it always ends this way. The vet thought he was a mixed breed who would grow to about thirty-five pounds. So, we raised him as a lapdog. He turned out to be mostly German Shepherd with some Retriever mixed in – he had one ear up and one ear down – and he grew to ninety pounds. But that simply meant he was a ninety-pound lapdog! He was a wonderful companion and great fun, part of what sold us on German Shepherds; Fosdick, we called him after Harry Emerson Fosdick, dog of grace and dog of glory!

But he was not quite as bright as most German Shepherds. On one occasion, when he had grown, and we had bought a house of our own, he got lost in our backyard. Maybe we should have named him Brody, after the Indiana Jones character Marcus Brody who was said to have gotten lost in his own museum! Our yard was not that big, though it did confuse real estate attorneys at closings because it was on three separate plats, and part of it was wooded. He got lost in our wooded area, and I had to go out in the night to retrieve him, bless his heart. He was afraid and unsettled, and then clearly quite relieved to be safe and sound.

Getting lost is a miserable experience, one most of us have had at some point, no matter how intelligent and sensible we are. Perhaps we have not gotten lost on the roads in this day of so many apps using GPS, though many

of us remember a time before all of this technology, and there are still places where apps are useless, like parts of the mountains of North Carolina. But there are many other ways of getting lost — on a hike through a forest, in a boat on water, and in places of life where we feel alienated from God, other people, and our own best selves.

We feel lost when we lose a life partner or parent, when our children grow up and move away, during any major transition of family. We feel lost when we change work, lose a job, or retire. We feel lost when we begin to question what we believe, where we fit in, who we really are and what difference our life makes. We feel lost when we disappoint ourselves, people whose opinion we value, and the God who loves us. And during this pandemic, we have felt lost in a long list of new ways, as we have had to search for community, navigate one change after another, and adapt how we do work, education, church, etc. It is not a good feeling. Lostness in any form is just miserable!

Jesus understands this reality. In fact, his entire ministry is directed toward people who are lost in profound ways, so much so that the Pharisees and scribes criticize him. In the story we have read, Luke says they grumble at him, saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” “Sinners” might refer to all of us, but they mean people who have transgressed in ways they think are worse, people who are not just lost but lost causes. Jesus does not embrace this latter perspective, he has come for these very people, those who need him most, all who are lost and estranged in any way.

So, he tells three parables, the two we have read and a third one about a lost son, two lost sons really. In each parable, what is lost is sought after until it is found — a sheep, a coin, the sons — but the narrative begins in lostness. The Israelites in today’s reading from Exodus have lost their way. With Moses, God’s messenger, away for an extended time, they have lost trust in God and made an idol to worship. In the reading from 1 Timothy, the Apostle Paul reflects on the time when he had lost his way, persecuting followers of Jesus. Getting lost is part of the human experience.

Other than Jesus, everyone in the story from Luke is lost. The people Jesus has reached out to are, but so are the Pharisees. They are lost in their confusion about what Jesus is doing. They are just as far away from God’s intent as the so-called sinners. They are like self-righteous people in churches

today who criticize leaders for spending too much time with people on the fringe of the church and society — those in jails and prisons, those who struggle with addictions and mental health issues, immigrants and refugees, the homeless — while neglecting upstanding church members. Those who are struggling may be lost, but so are the critics of caring people.

They are many ways to be lost, and we all fit into this category at some point, but the biblical story, including our reading from Luke, isn't just about being lost, it's also about being found. That's the point of Jesus' parables. The lost sheep must be searched for until it is found, just like the lost coin, and while there is rejoicing over the finding of these lost things, there is greater rejoicing in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents, one person lost in any way who is found. That's the focus of Jesus' ministry. That's why he spends so much time with people others consider sinful. They need him. They are lost, and the God who was in Christ will search for them until they are found.

One message for us here is about our calling to reach out to those who are struggling, even if we receive criticism for doing so. I remember a conversation between the Winston-Salem Habitat for Humanity leadership and national Habitat founder Millard Fuller. Our folks were celebrating the fact that we had not had anyone default on a loan. We had built many homes and all the families in them were doing okay. Our leaders expected affirmation from Millard, but what he said was, "Apparently, you aren't taking enough risks."

To be clear, Habitat wants to be successful. Its vision is of a world where everyone has a safe and decent place to live. But it is possible to be so focused on "success" that we refuse to work with those who are in the greatest need. Jesus never avoided the greater challenge, the more desperate soul, the person lost the deepest in the forest. Nor should we, whether we are talking about someone who has been homeless for years, someone who has struggled with addiction for decades, someone who has long since given up on God. I can check every one of these boxes with real human stories wherein members of this church helped others, often members of this church, lost in all of these ways to be found.

But while this story reminds us of our calling to reach out to those on the margins, it has another message for us — the God who was in Christ will not stop searching for us when we are lost until we are found. We often speak of our search for God, which is appropriate. In this chaotic and rapidly changing postmodern world, it can be difficult to locate any evidence of the divine. Where was God twenty-one years ago today when so many died in the terrorist attacks? Where is God now in Ukraine? Where is God in our divided culture? Where is God in our lives? Our search is valid, but we need to remember that God is searching for us too. And the real problem is not that God is lost or hiding from us, but that we are lost or hiding from God.

I have shared with some of you before a story from Robert Fulghum’s book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* about an October Saturday evening years ago when some neighborhood kids were playing hide-and-seek (pp 56-58). It brought back memories for him, as it would for most of us, but as Fulghum kept watching, he noticed one kid hiding so well that no one could find him. He was hiding under a pile of leaves under Fulghum’s window. As the other kids were giving up, Fulghum thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive the kid out, but instead simply yelled out the window, “GET FOUND, KID!” at which point the boy started crying and ran home. “It’s real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes,” says the author.

Fulghum goes on to talk about a man who hid his cancer so well from his family that they were left out of his journey, and about the medieval notion that God hides from us, *Deus Absconditus*, but he dismisses that notion, saying God prefers to play Sardines, a game where we all hide away together. His point is that we are better off not hiding from God, each other, or ourselves. We are better off allowing ourselves to be found. And in the end, that’s all it takes, because God never gives up searching for us and seeking to extend love to us.

If we ever doubt this, we need only consider Jesus’ parables in our reading from Luke. Lostness may be part of the human experience, but so is being found, because God never stops searching for us.