



THE LOST & FOUND BOX

Luke 15:1-10; I Timothy 1:12-17

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Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are stories that really resonate in our hearts and describe what is often our reality. We all know what it feels like to be lost, in a literal or figurative sense. I'd venture to say that most of us have at least one really good getting lost story- perhaps when we got separated from a parent at a shopping mall, or took a wrong turn driving to an unfamiliar place - even with today's GPS systems we can still get lost. I have to confess I don't have a very good sense of direction and am rather geographically challenged. I've spent a good amount of time since getting here driving around not knowing where I'm going..... even the fancy AT&T navigator app I have on my new I-phone has not kept me from getting lost a few times. Once I've laboriously typed in the location of where I want to go, it devises a route and then talks to me and tells me which way to go, where to turn etc. If I miss a turn or decide I want to go a slightly different way.... It tells me over and over again, "You are now off track, You are now off track." Sometimes it doesn't recognize when I've gotten to where I'm going..... so I'll be walking from my car into the place where I'm going, and it keeps telling me, You are now off track, you are now off track. Over the last two weeks, I've been told I'm off track more times than I can count. It just seems in our nature to easily get off track, physically, emotionally or spiritually.

Some of you may be familiar with the very popular Left Behind series, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. These books certainly play upon the human anxiety and fear of being lost and off track. Let me give you a little taste of it.

Picture this scene in your mind: An airline pilot is piloting a commercial jet on a routine flight from Chicago to London. Suddenly, a flight attendant bursts into the cabin to tell him about an extraordinary occurrence- several passengers aboard the plane have mysteriously disappeared. The pilot radios London to report what has happened, and learns that similar incidents like the one on his plane have been taking place all over the world. Driverless cars are crashing into each other because their drivers have seemingly been suddenly snatched away. What is going on here? This is the opening scene of the first book of the "Left Behind" series: what is referred to as "The Rapture" has happened- Christ has returned to earth and snatched up all the faithful to take back with him into some other-worldly sphere. After "The Rapture," the "apocalyptic age" begins, and those who are left behind must face seven terrible years of suffering and tribulation while a great apocalyptic battle between good and evil takes place.

The kind of theology these books are based upon is seen by most mainline Christians as a distortion of scripture as well as bad theology, but the Left Behind series has spawned a huge, multi-million dollar industry, with not only more and more sequels coming out but also movies and video games. All of which play on people's fears and anxieties about being one of those who is left behind.



Today's lessons give us a far different picture of God than the God who is depicted in the Left Behind series. The parables we heard from Luke's gospel convey the glorious good news that no one is left behind. A shepherd leaves 99 sheep to go after the one that is missing. A woman turns her whole house upside down looking for a measly little coin and doesn't stop looking until she finds it.

Remember those games of hide and seek we've played, in which someone hides so well that they don't get found- everyone gives up looking and wanders off to play another game, and after a while the one they gave up on comes out of hiding, mad that the others gave up looking. Well, we have a God that no matter how well hidden we are, no matter how lost, keeps looking for us, keeps seeking us out.

Just as it would be hard to imagine an orchestra without a violin, or a soccer team without a goalkeeper, every member of the flock is of infinite value to God. If you're that missing violin player or missing goalkeeper, this one is for you..... because here we have a vision of how God's community works: God's community is not complete until everyone is in the circle of God's love - and God will never, ever give up looking for any one of us. No one is expendable.

We've all seen those lost and found boxes at school or at the local Y or places where we work- they are filled with items like a single mitten or sock, water bottles, jackets, jewelry and the like. Often these lost and found boxes are accompanied by a sign with a stern message: Unclaimed items will be disposed of or given to charity if not claimed within x amount of time. Signs posted around the building remind us to check the lost and found box before we leave, else some valuable item that we don't even know that we've lost will be thrown out.

Imagine if God had a lost and found box- not of missing items but of lost people. Who would be in that box today? The trapped miners in Chile, the Pakistani flood victims, the homeless youth, the battered wife, the unemployed worker... We can all think of many examples of lost and suffering people who need relief and rescue from pain and despair.

There were plenty of lost people in Jesus' day, and in fact the reason Jesus told these parables is that the religious leaders were on his back about all the lost souls he had a habit of hanging out with. They were grumbling- This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. The point of these parables is not only Jesus' compassion for the poor and outcast that the good religious folk considered to be sinners, but also a warning about how easy it is for those who believe they have the truth to become arrogant, self-righteous and pride-full. The lost are the heroes in these stories- and there's a sense in which it's better to be lost - to be aware of one's need and one's imperfections- than to be all stuck up with the Finders Keepers Losers Weepers syndrome- that's the us and them syndrome- the one where people are so smug in their own self-righteousness that they condemn others beyond their immediate circle, as if there were only 1 true flock, 1 true coin collection, 1 true family of insiders with everyone who thinks differently on the outside. Centuries of persecution of Jews by Christians, and the horrific slander of and bigotry towards Muslims today remind us all too clearly of how



destructive this "us and them" syndrome can be. Those who display a lack of compassion and tolerance and acceptance - those of us who enjoy privileges the rest of the world can only dream of- those of us who are lost in greed or materialism or prejudice- are just as lost as those who have more obvious conditions of human pain and need. The Lost and Found box has all kind of folk in it! The good news is that God doesn't throw any of us out, God doesn't give up on any of us- whether we know we are lost or not, whether we are overly secure or overly insecure, whether we are lost in blindness to the pain of others or lost in pain ourselves- God continues to be with us, to love us and seek us out and offer us second chances and new beginnings, to give us help and hope. That divine presence, that loving shepherd, that unrelenting woman- however you want to picture God- is looking for you, and will not give up until you find yourself caught up within God's loving and compassionate embrace.

It's a relief to realize that most of the people we read about in the Bible were picked up out of God's lost and found box. I was looking through the book that the Adult Sunday School class is using right now- Barbara Brown Taylor's "An Altar in the World." And my attention was drawn to the chapter about getting lost. In it she points out that "The Bible ...reminds me that God does some of God's best work with people who are truly, seriously lost." She goes on to describes various ancestors in faith- Abraham and Sarah, chosen by God not because they were spiritual giants but because they were willing to set off an a divinely inspired trip without a map, equipped with nothing but God's promise to be with them. She describes how Abraham passed Sarah off as his sister to avoid getting hurt by powerful men who found her attractive....Sarah got so tired of Abraham asking her if she was pregnant yet that she sent him in to sleep with her handmaid Hagar. And out of the union between Abraham and Hagar, Ishmael is born. Muslims trace their roots back to Ishmael. One of the most important faith stories for Muslims is Hagar and Ishmael's experience of being lost in the wilderness and of God's rescue of them.

On this anniversary weekend of 9-11, it's important to remember that Jews, Christians and Muslims are all descendents of Abraham- we usually use the term Judeo-Christian tradition, but actually we are part of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. We all share a common Abrahamic tradition, and our sacred texts all emphasize the love and of God and neighbor, peace and justice as foundational principles of the faith. Terrorism and hatred are the enemies, not Muslims!

Coming back to Barbara Brown Taylor's description of our biblical ancestors, and fast forwarding a few hundred years, God chose a fugitive named Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, after which time they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, constantly resisting the journey forward. She gives other examples, ending with Jesus, who before his ministry even starts, consents to being lost, and endures 40 days in the Judean desert being tested by everything from wild animals to a scripture-quoting Satan. (pp. 73-75)

In our lesson from First Timothy, we heard about Paul, who describes himself as the "chief of sinners". Before he became a follower of Jesus he was an intolerant and cruel and relentless persecutor of Christians- how much easier it would have been for God to write him off. And yet that's not what God does. God pursues him with the same tenacity as that shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep and goes after the one that is lost.



What about us today? We can surely take heart and take hope from these stories and from the reminder that God does great work with people who are lost. We know what it is like to be the lost sheep who feels alone and scared and separated from the rest of the flock. We know what it is like to be the lost coin, feeling of little worth or value to those around us.

Today's scriptures have an empowering message - God believes in us, and wants every one of us to be a part of the beloved community God is seeking to build. God values each one of us for who we are, and if that's the case, part of our calling is to recognize how valuable and precious each of us is to God. If we are so important to God that God will keep looking for us no matter what, then isn't that a clarion call to each of us to take God at God's word and claim who we are as - and live as those who are deeply valued, as those who have something important to offer the world. When we're feeling inadequate, or overlooked, or of lesser value than someone else, or lost in self-doubt, God cares so much that God will do anything to seek us out and will be utterly overjoyed to find us.

One commentator on today's parables said "there's a party in heaven with your name on it." Well let's paraphrase it and say there's a party right now with your name on it! In this church, in this community you are wanted, you are needed, you have a unique identity and purpose to fulfill, there is great joy in God's heart that you are here, and the more you believe that and live as the precious child of God that you are, with gifts to offer, with contributions you can make, the joy just keeps growing and overflowing. How wonderful if we could let ourselves get caught up in that tidal wave of joy - the joy of being found, of being welcomed into the family, and given a part to play that no one but you in all your uniqueness can do. The feelings you have, the thoughts you think, the words you speak, the actions that you take, the talents that you offer really really really matter.

Not only do we have a message here about how much we matter, but how important it is to let others know they matter. We need to see ourselves not only as the lost sheep that is found and rejoiced over, but also the caring, compassionate shepherd who realizes when someone is missing, who goes out looking for the lost, the lonely, the fearful, the forgotten, and won't give up until every one of God's children knows they are loved, welcomed and rejoiced over.

May each of us feel deep within ourselves an overwhelming sense of the intrinsic value and worth each of us has before God. May each of us know the joy of living as those who are valued- and who help others discover their value. Amen.