

Lost and Found
Psalm 34; Luke 15:1 – 10
Sunday, September 15, 2019

When I was about four or five years old, growing up in Florida, my parents took me and my brother to a concert on the beach. There were over 60,000 people crammed onto this tiny strip of beach, so it was absolutely packed; just a sea of people standing should-to-shoulder, stretching out as far as you could see. I didn't really care about the concert, so I was just playing around at the edge of the water, and at one point, I looked up, and I could not find them. Thirty-five years later I still remember, vividly, that feeling; the absolute panic and sheer terror of being lost. I'm frantically looking around for them, but I'm little, so all I can see are thousands and thousands of *legs*, and they all look the same.

For a while, I thought that I was never going to see my parents again. That even though I was surrounded by tens of thousands of people, I was completely *alone* in the world. I mean, these are the people I depend on for *life*, for *everything*, and they were *gone*. The fear was absolutely paralyzing. I just stood there and started *crying*. Eventually, I remember hearing their voices calling my name, and they came through the crowd and got me. It probably wasn't very long, maybe 10 or 20 seconds, I'm not sure, but it *felt* like an *eternity*. And they weren't even that far away. They were right there the whole time...I just couldn't *see* them.

For about the past year – maybe a little longer – I have felt *lost* like that. I think it started around the time my father died last May. Even though I hadn't had a relationship with him for about 12 years (or maybe *because* of that), I had to figure out what to *do* with that, how to make *sense* of that and make *peace* with it, what that *meant* for me and where it *fit* in my life. And then right after that it was walking with Oliver Feldman, trying to be a pastor to a 16-year-old and his family as he died from bone cancer; struggling with the *unfairness* of that. You know, how do

we make sense of God in the midst of *that*? And then right after *that* was Ridgley's medical issues and medical leave; trying to *understand* all of that and walk through it with you as one of your pastors is sick and gone.

And there were all these other little things along the way, not to mention just a heightened sense of the stress and turmoil in the world around us (constant mass shootings, threats of war, political tension and seeing children being separated from their parents), the suffering of the world that just weighs on *all* of us, and whether we realize it or not, we carry it around with us and it affects us. I know it did *me*. I was exhausted – mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. My prayer life was pretty much non-existent. I wasn't talking to God, and I had no real sense of God's presence in my life. I just felt like I was *lost*. Adrift. Overwhelmed and paralyzed by fear and anxiety and sadness and despair. I was that little boy, standing at the edge of the water, crying out for God.

And I don't say this to garner sympathy. I don't want it to sound like I'm *complaining*, because I'm *not*. That's not why I'm sharing this. It's like St. Francis famously prayed, "May I not so much seek to *be* consoled as *to* console." I share this because I have the *feeling* that I'm not the only one here who has felt like this (recently). I've had enough conversations with you all to know that I'm not the only one struggling with these things. We still *believe* in God. That's not the question. It's just like that day on the beach with my parents. We know that God is *here, somewhere*; we just can't always *see* him. We get lost. There's a singer named Conor Oberst who says it this way, "You're the switch on the wall / in the dark of the hall / I'm still fumbling for." Ever have that experience? You get up at night or you're in a dark room, and you know that light switch is around here somewhere; you just can't *find* it.

The 16th century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross referred to this experience as “the dark night” or “the dark night of the soul.” It’s this experience where, you don’t *lose* your faith, you still *believe* in God; you just lose a sense of the *presence* or *imminence* or *love* of God in your life. Mother Teresa famously struggled with this for *fifty years*. She was surrounded by some of the worst pain and suffering imaginable as she ministered to the poorest of the poor, the people the no one else wanted, people left to die on the streets, and she cared for them as they died. Experiencing that day after day *has* to make you question where God is in the midst of all that.

She once wrote, “I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer...Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul...I am told God lives in me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”¹ This is the experience of Jesus, as he cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s knowing that there *is* a God, directing your words and your actions and your *life* to God, but just feeling like you are *separated from* God.

The thing about the dark night of the soul, though – according to St. John of the Cross – is that it is an *inherent part* of the spiritual journey; the journey toward *true, intimate union* with God. Christ had to suffer and die before he could rise and ascend. It’s almost like we have to experience *absence* before we can truly understand and appreciate *presence*. St. John of the Cross referred to it as a *purging*; that in order to come to true and total reliance on God, our lives must be purged of all that which is *not* truly God. Addicts refer to it as “hitting rock bottom.” You have to be *down* before you can go *up*. You have to be *lost* before you can be *found*.

¹ <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/faith-and-character/faith-and-character/mother-teresas-long-dark-night.html>

The reason that I'm sharing this with you today is because I *feel like* I've been found. Or at least I'm on the climb back *up*. And I wanted to invite you to come on this journey with me, in the off chance that you find yourself in the same place.

Back at the beginning of August, I took two weeks of vacation. I hadn't had a week off since December, and since then I had buried Oliver and my father and gone through everything with Ridgley's leave, all while trying to work on a doctorate. I was absolutely exhausted; running on empty. I had just enough to do what *had* to be done each week, but nothing beyond that. So I was really looking forward to those two weeks off. I was hoping it would be a time that I could rest and be renewed. But it *wasn't* that. I came back in the same place I had been before. And I *knew* that this wasn't sustainable.

In the months before that – I follow this pastor and author named Brian Zahnd on Twitter; he lives outside Kansas City, where he pastors a church that he started 38 years ago. He posts on Twitter every now and then about this two-day “prayer school” that he leads multiple times a year. He calls it the most important thing he does in his ministry; teaching people how to pray, how to deepen their prayer life and relationship with God. I thought, “That sounds interesting,” and I kind of tucked it away in the back of my mind. At one point he posted, “I'm about to turn 60, and I'm finding that I can't do as many of these prayer schools as I used to. So this one in September is going to be the last one we do this year.” Well, the night that we came back from vacation, I went online and signed up for it. See, my *thinking* was that my prayer life had been so empty – I just hadn't been talking to God – that if this could just help me get *that* kickstarted again, I'd be in good shape. I just needed to get back into the habit of praying again. So, go to a two-day prayer school, get a little tune-up, and I'd be good to go.

At the end of the first day – there were about 90 of us there – we all gathered together in this chapel for worship and communion. The pastor was speaking, and I can't even tell you everything he was talking about (it was *a lot*), but he was focusing on faith, not as intellectual belief or even as a set of practices, but as a *direct experience of the presence of God*. And as he spoke, I started to realize that my *problem* wasn't with *prayer*. My prayer life was just a *symptom* of the *real* problem. The *problem* was that it had been a *long time* since I'd had a *direct experience of the presence of God*. A deep, real, lived awareness that God was with me. Of course, in that time I have always *believed* in God – I've had *faith* – it's just been a while since I have felt that God was as present with me as you are right now. And when *that's* the problem, *of course* your prayer life is going to be a challenge. How are you going to have a regular conversation with someone who you're not *present with*?

As I sat there in worship and we shared communion, this thought started running through my mind. This sentence just repeated over and over again. *I want to know you*. Like it was just coming out from some place deep inside me that I couldn't even control, *I want to know you*. And again, it's not like I've never *known* God. I *have*. I've *had* those direct experiences of God's presence before. It's just been a while. And over the past 13 years, since the death of our daughter, I've been on this path where I've been learning a lot *about* God because what I'd always been *taught* about God no longer squared up with my *lived experience*, so I've had to do a lot of work on *who is God* and what do I believe *about* God. But knowing *about* God is different than *knowing* God. I know a lot *about* Abraham Lincoln, but I don't *know* him.

So that thought, *I want to know you*, just kept calling out from within me. As I took communion, *I want to know you as real as I can taste this bread and juice on my tongue*. *I want to know you*.

And here's the thing. There came a point where I didn't know if *I* was the one saying that to *God*, or if *God* was the one saying that to *me*. *I want to know you*. Or maybe it was *both*. Maybe *God* was echoing *my* desire, and *I* was echoing *God's* desire. Like the psalmist says, "Deep calls to deep."

Jesus tells these two parables about a shepherd who loses a sheep and a woman who loses a coin. And they put everything else aside, leave everything else behind and go looking for them until they *find* them. And what this shows us is that *God will stop at nothing to seek us out*. It's not like God is just sitting around saying, "You know where I am. Whenever you want to find me, just do the work. Go to church, read your Bible, pray. It's up to *you* to connect with *me*." No, God seeks *us* out. God comes looking for *us*. God calls out for *us*. When we *wander* away from God or when we feel like God has left *us*, God *finds a way* back to us.

I mean, isn't that exactly what God did in Jesus? When we turned away from God or lost our way, *God came to us*, became *one* of us to live life *right there with us* in flesh and blood, sharing the struggles of life with us, even the struggle of feeling God's absence. It is *in Christ* that God says to us, "I want to know you. *Every part* of you – the good, the bad, all of it. I'm never going to give up on you, in life or in death." The psalmist says, "This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble...Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all...When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears...God is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit."

Paul says it this way to the Romans, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither

death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing. Nothing can separate us from God’s love because of Jesus Christ. It may *feel* like it at times. We may *feel* like God is *distant* or *absent*. But God never actually *leaves* us. It’s just that sometimes our lives are so crowded with fear and anxiety and pain and suffering that we can’t *see* God. But God can *use* those experiences to draw us into a deeper awareness of God’s presence and love.

I stand before you today as living proof of that. I told you last Sunday how at this prayer school I went to, one of the things we all agreed to do was pray the same prayers together, every day for 40 days – about 30 minutes of prayer every morning, praying scripture and the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostle’s Creed and the 23rd Psalm and prayers from the Book of Common Prayer and some time not praying any words at all, just *sitting* with Jesus, *being* in the presence of Christ. And I tell you, I have prayed more and spent more time in the presence of God over the past seven days that I have in the past year total. It’s been this realization of, “Oh, you’ve been here this whole time. I just needed to stop and turn myself back to you and open myself up to you and spend time with you. I want to *know* you, and that’s how we *do* that; by simply *being* with you.”

God used my struggles and Twitter and a pastor in Missouri and a prayer school to seek me out. Things that I couldn’t even see unfolding over months and months. Imagine what God is using with you, right now, that you’re not even aware of to seek you out and draw you closer. Wherever you are in your relationship with God, whatever you might be struggling with or *needing*, God is not content to let you be. God wants to *know* you – in a newer and deeper way than God ever has before. And perhaps God is using *this* (whatever it is) to *do* that.

So I want to invite you to join me on this journey. And I think we start very simply. Just start by praying, “I want to know you.” Pray it at lunch, pray it tonight, pray it tomorrow morning, whenever. Pray it silently to yourself or say it out loud (although, I promise you, it feels better when you say it out loud). That is as real a prayer as you will ever pray in your life. *I want to know you*, in newer and deeper ways, *I want to know you*. Pray it over and over again and just see what happens. Because maybe, when *you* pray it, you’re just echoing what *God* is already saying to *you*. *I want to know you*.