

Lost and Found
Luke 15:1–10; 1 Timothy 1:12–17
Sunday, September 11, 2022

Let us pray: Call out to us through your word, O Lord, that we might hear your voice and know that we are found, in Christ. Amen.

Several years ago, I came across the story of a man who had been sentenced to life in prison for committing some pretty horrible crimes. He had confessed to all of them and accepted responsibility for it, even saying, “I deserve to be dead for what I did.” In an interview for a news story, he had remarked that he just wished he could “find a little peace.” There was a man watching that interview who had spent most of his life ministering to men in prison. He said he heard the hurt in his voice and thought, “I know somebody who can give you that peace. His name is Jesus Christ.”

So he sent him a Bible along with a course that he could work through to learn about Jesus. They started corresponding, talking about faith and repentance. He started attending weekly Bible studies and chapel services. He was baptized in the prison whirlpool tub, confessing Jesus Christ as his Lord and savior and asking forgiveness for his sins. And people were *skeptical*. They questioned the sincerity of his faith and whether someone like him *could* be forgiven, could be loved by God. But he was spending the rest of his life in prison. He was never going to get out. So it’s not like he was trying to fool people into thinking that he was a different person in order to curry some favor and get an early release. The people around him believed his faith to be sincere. He had said, “I am so sorry for what I have done. God help me, I will never do that again.”

A couple of months after he was baptized, he was attacked by another inmate in the prison chapel, but the weapon that he was using broke, so it only scratched him, and he survived. He wrote to the man who had initially sent him that Bible, "I believe that it was only the protective grace of our Great Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that saved me from serious injury or death!" But he said that he no longer *feared* death or viewed it as a *punishment*. He had been made right with God and saw death, whenever it came, as an opportunity to spend eternity with Jesus.

A few months later, he was attacked again, and this time he was killed. When the man who had sent him that Bible heard about it, he said, "I know that he was ready. Today, all the angels in heaven are rejoicing because he has come home. On the great resurrection day, I'm expecting to see him right along there with Abraham, David, Isaac, James, John, and all the saints that have lived right up to the modern day."

We love hearing stories like that, don't we? Stories of the *lost* being *found*. Stories of *redemption* and *transformation*. Because they give us *hope* that, if it was possible for *him*, it's possible for *anyone*, even *us*. We love hearing stories like that...until we hear that the man in that story was Jeffrey Dahmer, one of the most horrific serial killers in history. And then there's a part of us that doesn't know what to *do* with that. We wonder whether a person who did the things he did could actually be forgiven and loved by God. I mean, surely God has to draw the line *somewhere*, right? There is actually a poem about Dahmer's baptism that I think really captures that feeling, and at one point it says, "For two weeks they left his baptismal robes in storage. They asked if he really believed it. If he could believe in all this...Can an honest man bathe in those kind of wounds and be allowed to ask for a penance?"

There is a part of us that grumbles with the Pharisees and scribes and says, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them?” Yeah, he does. And thank God for that. Because the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom *he* (and *we*) are the foremost. To say that we are sinners is not a criticism or condemnation, it is a *diagnosis*. It is saying that there is something at work inside of us that needs to be *healed*. Christ did not come for the righteous but for sinners (to *make* them righteous), and we have *all* sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Far be it from us to place limits around who *can* be redeemed, lest someone place those same limits around *us*. We are *all* in need of forgiveness and love and redemption.

The word that we have here today is that Jesus Christ seeks and saves the lost, and we are never too lost to be sought and saved.

These two parables that Jesus tells bear witness to that; that *God will stop at nothing to seek us out*. It’s not like God is just sitting around saying, “Hey, 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*. And when we turn to God, maybe it’s just because we have heard God’s voice calling out to us. When we *wander* away from God or when we feel like God has left *us*, God *finds a way* back to us.

And then Paul bears witness to that with his very *life*. “I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” Paul hunted people down simply because they believed that Jesus is the Messiah. He arrested them, imprisoned them, even stood by approvingly while they were killed, holding the coats of the people who stoned them. Shane Claiborne often points out that Paul was a religious *terrorist*, by the very definition of the word. There are all these stories in Acts where

Christians *heard* about Paul and were *terrified* of him. He terrorized Christians to prevent them from living out their faith. *And yet*, he went on to write half of the books of the New Testament and to be probably Christianity's most foundational theologian aside from Jesus because, he says, "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. I received *mercy*."

The stories that Jesus tells here, the story of Paul, the story of *Jeffrey Dahmer* should give us *hope*, because if people who were so lost can be found, it can happen to others. If Christ showed mercy on *them*, then Christ might show mercy to *anyone*, no matter what sins have been committed. But in order to be found, we first have to admit that we are lost. And that raises an interesting question about who we identify with in Jesus' parables.

Do we identify with the sheep and the lost coin that were lost and sought out and found by God, sinners who have experienced the healing, saving grace of Jesus Christ? Do we identify with the 99 sheep and the 9 coins that were never lost, never needing to be sought out and saved in the first place; we've always been right there with God? Do we identify with the shepherd and the woman who search for them; are *we* seeking out the people around us who are lost – whatever that *lostness* looks like – that they might be restored? Do we identify with the community that rejoices when the lost are found, celebrating God's saving grace with *everyone* who experiences it?

At different times, at different points in our lives, we can identify with different people in those parables. Maybe once you were the lost sheep, but now you are part of the community that rejoices. Maybe you're a lost coin today, and if that's the case, I have good news for you. You are of immense value and worth to God, and God is seeking you out, calling you back, here

today. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter what has been done *to* you, God *wants* you. God *loves* you. God's healing, saving grace is for *you*, and it's never too late to be found. It is not about what *you* have done or what anyone has done *to* you, it is about what *Christ* has done *for* you. It's not about who *you* are or who you are *not*, it's about who *Christ* is and who Christ can *make* you.

I have experienced that healing, saving love *so many times* throughout my life. I have been lost again and again, only to be sought out and found by Jesus again and again. We are *all* sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God, but we have never fallen *too far* short. Where do you need God to seek you out? Wherever it is, you can call out to God in prayer, "Lord Jesus, I feel so lost right now. Come find me. I can't find *you*, come find *me*." Every morning when I pray, as a part of my prayer liturgy I say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner," and then I pray a prayer of confession:

Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done, and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
And we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
Have mercy on us and forgive us;
That we may delight in your will
And walk in your ways
To the glory of your name. Amen.

Because I know that, even though I'm the *pastor*, I'm still a sinner in need of redeeming. *We all* are. And we have to be honest about that. Because the point of this story that Luke tells us about Jesus and the Pharisees and the scribes is that God rejoices at the repentance of sinners, not at the self-righteous who suppose they need no repentance.¹ Which are we? Do we recognize

¹ Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, pg. 239.

our ongoing, day-to-day need for God’s forgiveness, God’s healing, saving love? Or do we say, “I’m not a *sinner*. I may not be *perfect*, but I’m doing alright!” If we are counting ourselves among the righteous, then God is not looking for us. But if, in humility, we count ourselves among those in need of forgiveness and mercy, then Christ will seek us out and save us.

So depending on who we identify with here, these stories should give us *hope*! It is so easy to focus on all the things that are *wrong* with our lives and the world around us. The violence and polarization and division and the sickness and the lies that we are bombarded with every single day. But what we have here, in these stories, is a hopeful vision of what the world *can become* – of what *we* can become – because of the faithful love of God that is at work in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.²

We may look around us right now and say, “I don’t see any sign of that! I don’t see any sign of God’s healing, saving love. I don’t see any sign that God is at work!” But Pastor Kendra Mohn writes, “During a time when some may be wondering where God is or what God is doing, “seeking the lost” may be the right answer.³ If we count ourselves among them, recognizing the ways that we are in need of God’s healing, saving love, then we will find God because God finds us. Salvation, reconciliation, forgiveness of sin, and peace with God come through what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ, taking the initiative to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.⁴

² *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship (Year C, Volume 3)*, pg. 314

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-3/commentary-on-luke-151-10-5>

⁴ *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship (Year C, Volume 3)*, pg. 318

So there is hope. There is hope for *this world*. There is hope for *us*. Hope for transformation. Hope for redemption. Hope for healing and new life. Because Jesus Christ came to seek and save the lost, and we are never too lost to be sought and saved. Thanks be to God. Amen.