

The Gospel for Losers
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Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Luke 15:1-10

I have a recurring nightmare in which I stride into the pulpit, eager and ready to proclaim God's Word, when I suddenly look down and realize that I have the wrong sheaf of papers in my hand. I rifle through them to no avail—there's nothing written on them remotely resembling anything of importance. I've lost the sermon! I stand rooted to the spot, tongue-tied with increasing panic, desperate to say something....anything! Well that can't happen today, because if I forget the message, there are five people who could leap to the rescue. They are the Fairmounters listed in your bulletin who agreed to participate in the first of what will be monthly conversations with a different group of members and friends about a biblical text for an upcoming sermon. One warm August morning, they gathered around my dining room table to read and discuss our morning gospel reading. Though this is a new approach for us, it really grows out of a conviction that preaching is not the sole work of the preacher, but is the result of an ongoing conversation among pastor and congregation. Though one person speaks, the best sermons reflect the shared perspectives, experiences, questions, pain and wisdom of the faith community. Together, we're seeking how to live faithfully before God. Together, we're trying to hear in ancient words of Scripture, God's Word for us today. A good sermon isn't the one you agree with; a good sermon is the one in which you hear some echo of your own soul's cries and whispers and questions and demands. And I believe the sermons delivered from this pulpit will be good to the extent that every one of us gets into the conversation.

Much of what you hear this morning comes directly from those five individuals as they've engaged the biblical text in a conversation with their own lives (though isn't this the place where I should make the disclaimer about all responsibility for errors resting with me??!). I'm grateful for their willingness to participate, and for the insights which will help us interpret this parable Jesus told. Now, won't *you* pull up a chair and join us at the table? Listen for God's Word to you, in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the fifteenth chapter at the first verse.

LUKE 15:1-10

Think of a time when you have lost something valuable or found something after a search. One person told of losing her wedding ring while cleaning the garage. Though she sifted the area with a fine toothed comb, the ring remained missing for a whole year before it turned up. Who among us has not felt the frustration of losing our car keys, or the serendipity of reaching into the pocket of a jacket we haven't worn recently and discovering a twenty dollar bill?

This parable is a good word for those who are spiritually lost, assuring them of God's persistence in the search and God's joy when they are found. It offers a glimpse of a God who actively seeks ones who are outside the security of the fold and who may feel far from home, isolated from others and even from their truest self and sense of purpose. The parable begs the question of economy too: by suggesting that God's attention is focused on one lost person, more than the many who are already safe.

But notice how I almost automatically refer to the spiritually lost as "them;" "those people." I assume an insider status, different (better?) than "those others," the ones who are lost. The group quickly moved deeper into the meaning of the parable by examining its context: the grumbling of the religious establishment toward Jesus' association with "sinners," those people on the outside, the ones who have not found themselves in faith...or in church. We became aware of

the often unconscious distinction we make between the “lost” and the “found,” the insider and the outsider. Jesus made no such distinctions; he broke bread with sinners before they repented. He welcomed the poor, the outcast, those with questionable morals, women and children, and foreigners with heretical beliefs. And the righteous were appalled. What’s happening to our community? He’s letting practically anyone in! People who don’t live by the rules...people who don’t have the right beliefs. . .people who are changing things by their very presence at the table.

In declaring that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance, Jesus obliterates the hierarchy of virtue that puts the righteous in first place. Everyone matters; everyone is important; you’re not ‘better’ even if you’re not lost. Jesus critiqued the exclusivist attitude of the religious leaders of his day with radical inclusion. God doesn’t want to lose anyone, and reaches out across human categories and distinctions to draw everyone into the flock. In light of this message, it’s easy to criticize the religious leaders for their self-righteousness. By contrast, the parable offers some very good news for the outsider, and that’s about it.

Or is it? Just when I thought the sermon group was winding down, one of them remarked, “Seems like you have to be lost before you can be found.” That comment opened a floodgate as each person spoke of particular ways a sense of feeling lost may be experienced. It’s normal to feel lost when you have no choices. But it’s also possible to feel lost when you have a multitude of choices and no clear sense of direction or idea about how to make a good one. In our contemporary world, we are inundated by information coming to us at a breathtaking rate. The accelerated pace of each day can leave us almost overwhelmed. Particularly when undergoing some life transition, we may sense the trajectory of our life has gone off course or lost momentum. We’re stuck in a rut, spinning our wheels. Or the opposite: we see our lives careening out of control. Sometimes we lose sight of our personal or family

priorities, and our lives become seriously out of balance, to the detriment of our relationships, our health, our spirits. And perhaps there is no more profound sense of loneliness than when we feel separated from the people we know best, when we are at odds with colleagues, estranged from family members, or even when we are too afraid to let anyone in to the deepest places of our lives. There are many who believe that humanity itself has somehow gotten off course and is perilously adrift. But friends, here's the gospel truth: for God so loved the world, that God continually seeks out any who are lost, to find and restore them and rejoice in their salvation.

Maybe Jesus told this parable so that the religious leaders could let down their guard of respectability long enough to admit their own condition. His words echo across time to us, the poster children for beautiful, talented, fortunate people...ones who work so hard... for whom it is hard to admit need, or acknowledge any vulnerability, any nagging fear, any still small voice within, any word suggesting that we might be lost. But sometimes you have to be lost before you can be found. And God wants to find you and me! A couple of you sent me a story that witnesses to this good news in a different way. A physician in a busy teaching hospital was caring for an elderly man who asked him to hurry, as he had an appointment he could not break. The physician inquired about it, thinking it might be another medical appointment in the same hospital. No, the man said, he had a daily appointment to go the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife, who was afflicted with Alzheimer's. The doctor said he would be brief, but hoped his wife wouldn't mind if he were a bit late. The man replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in some time. "Then why," the doctor asked, "do you go every day?" The man smiled wistfully and replied, "She may not know me, but I still know her."

Friends, even when we don't know God, even when we forget all about God, God never forgets us; God knows us, God loves us, and God is always looking for us in order to find us. And

when you get right down to it, who among us *isn't* lost? --at least in some ways, at least at some times.

We cannot fail to notice one final important feature of this text: it is overflowing with joy. There is great rejoicing when the lost is found, a joy compared to the joy of heaven when a sinner repents. But even more significantly, it is a joy that must be shared. When I find the car keys I had mislaid—again!—I don't invite my friends and colleagues to a party. I silently berate my carelessness, sigh about the inevitable decline of increasing age, and move on with relief that a crisis has been diverted for now. In God's economy, however, the restoration of the lost is cause for community celebration because it is the restoration of community. We who were divided –tax collectors and religious leaders, sinners and saints—are invited to the same party. The human community—so scarred by social strata; so divided by difference—has been brought together by the One who extends mercy to all of us. The rejoicing comes from the recognition that we're in this together; we belong together.

--which sort of makes church look different: not so much a haven of privilege as a sanctuary for sinners. Actually, a party venue, where we celebrate the place and purpose we have found. Or that has found us. In church we call it grace, amazing grace: the unconditional, unending, unbounded love poured out upon us all by the living God. We come to worship not to call attention to our righteousness, but to offer thanks to God for not leaving us in unrighteousness. We come to worship to connect with others, to say to each other in effect, you are not alone; you also are part of the flock. And you know what that means: as recipients of God's grace, we become ministers of God's grace, extending in ever wider circles the gift that will lead us -all!--home.

Thanks be to God!

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