

Lost

Luke 15:1-10

Whitefish UMC

September 12, 2010

- † No, this sermon is not about the recently concluded TV series, “Lost,” although it was tempting to use it as a “hook” to draw you in. The sad truth is that I never really got into “Lost,” and though some of my pastor friends could see all kinds of Christian symbolism in it, I just didn’t get it. Sorry.
- † What I do get is what it is like to be lost, and how good it feels to be found. When I was about six years old, my mother took my little sister, then three, downtown to Marshall Fields. At the beautiful, stately department store, my mother took us to the Walnut Room for lunch and then shopping for a dress for her on the fifth floor.
- † Of course my mother had admonished us to stay close to her, but for a moment she became distracted, and when she turned around, my little sister was gone. Vanished. Now if you’ve ever been in the old Marshall Field’s in Chicago, its flagship store (now owned by Macy’s—what a travesty!), you know that it is huge—it takes up two whole city blocks.
- † To add to the worry, my little sister had a serious heart defect, which caused us to be especially anxious for her safety. My mother was frantic, and I caught her fear. For as much as my sister was a pain in the neck sometimes, she was MY sister. Soon the salespeople and the store detective were engaged in the search. Announcements were made over the loudspeaker, to no avail.

- † An hour passed—still no Penny (my sister). Finally, my mother started searching the racks of dresses and found my sister sound asleep, having hidden among the dresses and grown so tired waiting to be found that she drifted off. My mother, tears streaming down her face, picked her up. My sister opened her eyes, smiled, and said “Mommy find me!”
- † The fact that this event is still indelibly etched in my memory attests to its significance. Of course there was great relief, great rejoicing that day. And that story was repeated again and again in our family. You see, Penny developed a habit of getting lost in the dress racks in department stores—she enjoyed having everyone look for her! She loved being the little lost Penny!
- † Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and we've been hearing the past few weeks about the large crowds that are gathering to hear him teach. Chapter 15 begins with two interesting sentences: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The next phrase is especially important: "SO he told them this parable:" It was the criticism of the religious authorities, the ones who make and enforce the rules and judge who is and isn't worthy, it was their grumbling and complaining that prompted Jesus to respond by telling these stories about being "lost."
- † When you hear these two parables, which character do you identify with? Are you one of the 99 obedient but annoyed sheep, or are you the lost one? Are you the good shepherd or the worried but determined woman? I'd venture to guess that we could each find our self in everyone of those roles, depending upon what day we are asked.

- † Alyce MacKenzie tells this story: If you're not a former Roman Catholic, you may have never heard this prayer: "Tony, Tony, turn around, Something's lost that must be found." I'm a United Methodist, but I had a friend once who told me to try praying it when I had lost my car keys. It's a prayer to St. Anthony of Padua who is believed to be the patron saint of lost items. The 13th century holy man left a wealthy family to become a poor priest. The tradition of invoking St. Anthony's help in finding lost or stolen things traces back to a scene from his own life. As the legend goes, Anthony had a book of psalms that, in his eyes, was priceless. There was no printing press yet. Any book had value. This was his book of psalms, his prayer book. Besides, in the margins he'd written all kinds of notes to use in teaching students in his Franciscan Order. A novice who had already grown tired of living a religious life decided to leave the community. Besides going AWOL, he also took Anthony's Psalter! When he went to his room to his prayer corner to pray and found it missing, Anthony prayed it would be found and returned to him.
- † After he prayed this prayer, the thieving novice fleeing through the forest, was met by a demon (ok, this part of the story is murky- how a negative could be an avenue of God's good) anyway he told the thief to return the Psalter to Anthony and to return to the Franciscan Order, which accepted him back.
- † Soon after Anthony's death, people began praying through him to find or recover lost and stolen articles. "A prayer to Christ," written in honor of St. Anthony shortly after his death goes like this:
- † "The sea obeys and fetters break
And shattered hopes limbs thou dost restore

While treasures lost are found again

When young or old thine aid implore. “

- † The popular version of this is “Tony, Tony, turn around. Something’s lost that must be found.”
- † There are most likely many coins clinking around on the floor of our congregation: lost hope, faith, self-confidence, perspective....so many lost things, so many in need of finding. A young man told me recently: “I can’t stand to go into my church anymore—not since my mother’s memorial service last winter.” How can we help him find the courage and the faith to return?
- † Another person said, “I’m afraid to go to church—all I do is cry there.” How can we help her find the hope that she has lost? For we are in the business of helping people find lost items. We are not in the business of judging who is worthy of being helped, even though we are really good at that part—at least if we aren’t careful.
- † What Jesus is really getting at in these two parables is that we are meant to be like God, like the Good Shepherd, who goes out finding those lost sheep, “risking skinned knees and strained wrists as we crawl into the ravines where they have stranded themselves.
- † Or wait, I guess we are to be the loving parental figure like Motel 6, we leave the light on for them, and we keep the home-faith fires burning while they’re out for a decade or so finding themselves. Isn’t this our calling—to be the one charged with turning on the lights, getting out the dirt devil, and listening for the thump that tells us a significant object has been sucked into the vac bag? Then get in with both hands and retrieve that thing, that person.” (McKenzie)

- † I wish I could just occupy myself with finding those good but misguided sheep that really want to be found. After all, I have enough to do just looking after those folks. But remember that second story about the woman, the one who looks for the lost coin (which doesn't particularly want to be found)? Jesus tells us that God is a lot like her (yes, God is like a woman as well as a male shepherd!). And we are meant to be like her, too.
- † A couple of years ago, a young man who I didn't know very well, but who was a friend of one of our beloved youth, ended up in jail. He was angry, had made some bad choices, and he was suffering the consequences. Tom and I were on our way to a Thanksgiving celebration with our son and his now fiancé. God was calling me to stop on the way and visit him.
- † I confess that I was scared to death. It was my first time visiting in the juvenile detention facility. I didn't know what to expect. My heart was racing and I didn't know what I would say. When the young man was brought into the visitor's area in handcuffs, he looked at me in surprise. "Why are you here?" he said.
- † I remember saying, "let's sit down and I'll tell you," or something kind of lame. I think I told him that I wanted him to know that I loved him and that God loved him. After a halting conversation, I asked if I could pray with him, and surprisingly, he said "yes." I reached over and took his hands, which were lifeless and limp at first. But as we prayed, I began to feel energy and strength in them, and tears came to his eyes and to mine.
- † There's a happy ending to this story. Others, our youth, led by Kerin, joined in helping bring him back to his true self and to healing and hope. But sadly, not all of these stories have happy endings. Yet God calls us to keep on seeking, finding, and inviting.

- † I need this reminder. Another visit to a scary place looms, where another lost lamb awaits. I need your prayers, and so does this young person. What strength it gives me to know that you open your hearts and doors to the least and the lost.
- † In this time of economic uncertainty, perhaps it makes bad business sense to invest in one lost sheep when there is a flock of ninety-nine pretty righteous sheep that needs tending. Why not just manage the bulk of the treasure—the bag of coins that is what we already have—to maximize efficiency?
- † But remember, God’s economy doesn’t work that way. We can try to do the math and argue the reasonableness of the shepherd’s leaving the rest of the sheep or wonder about the expense of a party over one coin, but we’d be missing the point and the call: God’s unrelenting search provides the true measure of a lost sinner’s worth. Percentages are not factored into the intensity of the search; there is no acceptable margin of loss.
- † As Henri Nouwen writes, “We are not loved because we are precious, but we are precious because we are loved.” That’s what Jesus was all about, and that’s what we are meant to be about, too.
- † The last few days have included a frenzy of media attention to a pastor of a small church in Gainesville, Florida, who has threatened to hold an event in which copies of the Koran, the sacred book of Islam, were to be burned. Military, political, and religious leaders, including many Christian denominations have condemned this pastor and his threatened action. Fear and anger abound.
- † Nearly every time you turn on the TV, open up the internet, or listen to the radio, or open a newspaper, people ask “Who is this nut-case with a flock of just 30 parishoners and why are people paying attention to him?” I find

myself becoming as frustrated as anyone else who longs for peace and tolerance among the world's religions.

† But I wonder, how would the Good Shepherd approach this little flock and its pastor? What has caused them to become so lost in hatred and misguided energy? What if we were to include them in our prayers and our compassion, instead of our ridicule? Just a thought—

† The shepherd seeks out the lost sheep, and the woman goes searching, cleaning furiously, looking for the lost coin. God is like that, the stories say, and we are meant to be like that, too. Amen.

Sources:

Alyce McKenzie, Lectionary Reflection for Sunday, September 12, 2010,

<http://www.patheos.com>

Kate Huey, "Weekly Seeds," <http://www.ucc.org>