

## **Proper 19: September 11th, 2016**

**Text:** Luke 15:1-10

**Title:** Lost and Found

A few years ago, while planning a meeting of our Altar Guild, the chair, Deborah Franklin, and I reflected on the heart of this ministry. Members of the Altar Guild prepare the Church for worship each Sunday, arranging everything from the welcome cards in your pews and the crayons for your kids to the flowers, the fabrics, and the bread and wine we'll soon share. We identified theirs as a ministry of hospitality and anticipation, but Deb pointed out that there was so much more to it. To illustrate, she told me about an experience she had as a college student working summers and holidays at Disneyland.

Early in the season, the management of the theme park would call everyone together for an important meeting. There was the guy who sold you your entrance ticket next to Snow White and Cinderella, the janitors stuck between roller coaster operators and Mickey and Minnie Mouse. I'm sure if the meeting were taking place today, Harry Potter would be in the mix. Add to that everyone who worked at the restaurants, games, and carts. The manager spoke to them about the mission of the park, and the ways in which each one of them might contribute to a precious family memory. And then he said something striking: that while they were selling tickets and monitoring lines, while they were waiting tables or posing for photos, while they were busy doing the thing they were ostensibly hired to do, they were to always remember that they had one even more important job - keeping an eye out for lost children. Every single employee of that park was alert to that fact that an average of 11 children go missing, usually briefly, in Disney parks each day. They were to look out for these vulnerable little people and their likely terrified parents, and do everything they could to reunite them.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus is also terribly concerned with lost people and lost things. He is speaking to scribes and Pharisees who have criticized him for keeping company with "sinners." In response to their concern, he shares two parables, asking, first, who, having lost one sheep, does not leave 99 others behind to find it, or what woman, having ten coins and losing one, does not do put everything else aside to search it out. He draws a parallel with God, saying that just as someone rejoices when they find their lost sheep or lost coin, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

I think we all get what Jesus is saying. We can imagine, either intuitively or from personal experience, what the lost sheep, coin, or child in Disneyland might feel – how scared, overwhelmed, and alone she would be. And if we are honest, we know these feelings can come up at any point in our life. We know that, even as adults, we often feel lost, too.

But there's also something more to today's parables. For starters, they don't obviously mean what Jesus says they mean. He's talking about sinners repenting – people who have turned away from God turning back, turning home. And yet in both parables, the sheep and the coin are not found because they want to be found. They do not turn toward their owners. They make no choice to come home. They are found only because the one who lost them misses them terribly, cherishes them, and is willing to exert a whole lot of energy on search and rescue.

Now I have no doubt that all the company of heaven rejoices whenever we consciously repent and turn our hearts back toward our source and center, but today's Gospel seems to be saying something else: that even when we *don't* do that, even when we *can't* do that, even – even

– when we simply *won't* do that ... when we are unable to look for God, whatever the reason, *God will come looking for us*. God does not, God will not, give up on us.

So what if, as Deborah so wisely pointed out, our real job is not setting out the crayons and the Small Group sign up cards, is not handing out bulletins or leading the prayers, is not leading your staff, managing projects, or tending to whatever consumes 40, 50, 60 plus hours in the office each week? What if our real job is helping God to keep an eye out for the ones who have gotten lost?

In 1963, the efforts and energies of most everyone involved in the Civil Rights Movement were focused on Birmingham, Alabama. Despite very real threats, community organizers, students, and common folk had organized for months in a series of boycotts and protests throughout the city, advocating for the equal rights of all people. At one point, members of the Ku Klux Klan planted 15 sticks of dynamite and a timing device under the steps at 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, a black Church where community meetings had been held. The device was detonated on a Sunday morning, injuring 22 people and killing four young girls. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called this "one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated."<sup>1</sup> And yet, when addressing his broken-hearted, discouraged, understandably angry community, he went on to make one of the most astonishing statements: "At times life is hard, as hard as crucible steel. In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not lose faith in our white brothers."<sup>2</sup>

King knew that the men who detonated this device were lost. He knew that all people advocating segregation and discrimination were lost, and, despite the evil they perpetrated, despite the countless thousands and thousands of lives lost to slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, bombings, and more, he refused to give up on them. Even in the darkness of that hour, he saw them as brothers and sisters, and he felt for them, and he knew no good could come of it if even those who would be justified in doing so succumbed to hate.

Today is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, when so many innocent lives were lost, where so many wars and extremist groups and acts of terrorism seemed to begin. In the years since, have we been as generous with our love, as courageous in our hope, as King once modeled, and as Jesus, even this morning, invites us to be? Have we held onto our faith in our Muslim brothers and sisters? in our fundamentalist Christian brothers and sisters? in our too conservative, or too liberal, political leaders? Closer to home, have we held onto our faith in our colleagues, family members, or fellow Church goers, when we disagree with them? When they have hurt us? When they seem lost? Or when we might seem lost to them?

As we enter another program year, and conclude our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a parish, as we enter an election season and a new semester, a new season of life and ministry together, let us remember our real job. Let us be constantly reminded of what *really* matters: not being right, but rejoicing when the lost is found, and, when we are able, stepping up to help with the search.

Do not lose faith in God. Do not lose faith in each other. And remember, always, that God does not, and will not, ever give up on us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> King, Martin Luther. *Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing*. Delivered on September 18, 1963. <http://www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/birminghamchurchbombingeulogy.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.