

“Where is the Lost and Found?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 14, 2010

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Psalm 32

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 15:1-10

My childhood friend, Glenn, if asked, would probably still admit that when he was younger, he could have been crowned “The Biggest Loser.” Granted, thirty years ago, that title would have had a whole different meaning.

Glenn was not the sixth-grade’s “Biggest Loser” because of his weight; that meaning has only been popularized over the past years because of the television show. It also does not refer to his being unpopular; being called a “loser” would not become fashionable until the Valley Girl trend of the mid-1980’s.

Glenn was the “Biggest Loser” because he lost a lot of stuff. He was notorious at our school for losing his homework – either before or after it had been done. Teachers learned to send home an extra copy of handouts home with me because he had so many times called me to see if he could make a copy to replace the one he had misplaced. One teacher even brought a red wagon to school so that Glenn could keep his folders and books in one place; so dangerous was it to risk transfers in and out of his locker.

While Glenn might admit to being have once been the “Biggest Loser,” and while some of his early educators might have wondered whether he was a lost cause, maturity found him and cured most of his forgetfulness.

If here today, we could imagine Jesus might have told a story about losing your homework (probably somewhere in that wagon), your car keys (which are still in the ignition) or your glasses (which are perched atop your head). For these types of things we search intently, frenetically, until the items are found. And the same is true for those things which are not just inconvenient to lose, but have real value: a wedding band or a valuable heirloom; something we really cherish. Like for a sheep of the fold and the lost coin, we would use the instruments that are given to us – a shepherd’s staff or a broom in the parables; community resources, research, technology, mercy, patience and love in our own situations – to seek out even those things that seem hardest to locate.

We sometimes think that the Lost and Found department is just for stuff that gets misplaced: like car keys or eyeglasses. But, think about that time – and I’m sure many of you have had this experience – when what was first lost and then found was a beloved child. Whether it happens at a shopping mall or at Chucky

Cheese, you can imagine the joy that follows the finding of a lost child; like when that announcement comes over the loudspeaker: “would the parents of...please come to the Lost and Found.” That is the way, Jesus says, that the angels with God in heaven will react; for there may be dozens or hundreds of people in that particular place, but how we truly rejoice when the one that is lost has been found.

Children sometimes wander off, and they can be prone to becoming the “Biggest Loser” of their things, but what about us? Here, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus is speaking to a mixed audience of both the lost and the found. The sinners and tax collectors are there. Surely, they know what it means to have lost their honor, dignity, and sense of self-worth. But there were also Pharisees and scribes present as well. They were there grumbling and wondering about this man who sits and eats with those around them so seemingly lost. Some present may have thought they could easily recognize who was lost and who was found, but we know that it’s not so straightforward.

Jesus tells his mixed audience a series of three stories – parables about being lost and found – these two that we read today followed by the lengthier parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus asks them to imagine the great rejoicing of a shepherd finding his lost sheep, and a woman finding her lost coin, and a Father welcoming home a wayward son. Among the crowd, there might have been shepherds holding their own crooks, and women holding brooms. There likely were those who had lost their children – even if only for a little while – and knew that feeling of joy when they had been found.

The lost sheep and the lost coin are more than just prized possessions of their owners; they are also parts of a whole. The sheep belongs to the flock and the coin to the purse; without them the whole is not complete. The search, then, is a quest for restoration and wholeness. In this sense, all of us who are part of God’s creation have been and maybe still should be just as anxious as God until the lost are restored and we are made whole again by their presence.¹

Jesus is therefore asking us to see God in the form of a shepherd; one that would risk the safety of the ninety-nine in order to save the one. This shepherd also had the compassion to place the stray on his shoulders and carry it back to safety, rather than making it walk on its own.. How relieved and thankful he must have been to find the wayward sheep; for he immediately summoned his friends to have a party.

Jesus’ listening audience would have known about shepherds, more than we do, but they may not have recognized a shepherd acting like this. Why take the

¹ Jennifer Copeland, “Clean Sweep” from *The Christian Century*, Sept. 7, 2004

risk of harm coming to all the others by leaving to save one? Why carry it like a child? Why go to the trouble of the big celebration; and why did he expect his friends would want to come?

Jerry Goebel offers this context for what a shepherd would have meant to those who were listening to his stories:

The shepherd was a rough masculine symbol to the Israelites, much as the American cowboy is for us today. He was a rugged individual, more comfortable with animal smells and nature's voice than with rituals, incense, and religious debate.

Although he might cast a romantic figure, he would not be a welcome visitor to the synagogue or the elegant table with matching silverware and china. He lived a rigorous life, fighting for scarce water and pastureland by day and half-awake at night, ever alert to numerous predators.

The shepherd had to be more comfortable with ways of nature than the ways of the refined man, a feature which doesn't lend itself to social interaction. Yet, every lamb would know his calming voice and run to it.

Perhaps the most dramatic symbol of the shepherd is verse 5: "When he has found it (the lost sheep), he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing." By the time the shepherd would have found the lost sheep it may have been half-dead with exhaustion and fright. There is no punishment in the shepherd's response, only pure concern and joy. He scoops up the lost one with compassionate arms and calms her with words of love, he doesn't want her any more frightened than she has been. He carries her—not drives her—back to the herd, back to her family where she will be nuzzled and welcomed back in the safety of family.

Are we like that shepherd? Are those our traits? Are we willing to leave the comfort of the flock in safe pasture to find the one that is lost in the dangerous cliffs surrounding the plateaus? Isn't that what Jesus has done for us?²

In the example of a lost sheep, you can develop some pity for the poor, little lost creature. You can feel bad envisioning it as injured or hurt or fearful. But it's harder to work up pity for a lost coin. A lost coin never even knows it's lost. One place is as good as another to a coin. What these two parables – put together – say to us is that what governs God's behavior to us is not our sins; it's not the

² Jerry Goebel, "Go After the One that Is Lost"

nature or the extent of our problems. It is God's need to find us. These parables highlight the need of the finder to find, not the need of the lost to be found.³

There is "*joy in heaven*" over the "*one sinner who repents*," we hear. Here there is an element of "double seek" included – the lost sheep is found *and* the sinner turns in the right direction. Three times, in the story of the seeking shepherd, there is reference to joy: the shepherd rejoices when he places the sheep on his shoulders, he encourages his friends to rejoice with him when telling them the good news, and pronounces that there will be joy in heaven when the sinner repents.

In this one chapter of Luke we encounter four views of the same God: a sheep that strays because it hasn't the sense to know better; a coin that is lost through no choice of its own; and – if we read ahead to the story of the Prodigal – a boy who chooses to get lost but learns the hard way what real love means; and a brother who chooses self-righteousness when he could have known pure joy. Jesus tells these stories to a mixed audience which, like just about any group of people, would fall into each of these categories. Some of them were lost because they aimlessly wandered from the right path; others were placed there wholly apart from their own choosing. Some have drifted away but then decided to come back home, while others cannot accept that grace and mercy are offered freely, thinking instead that they have come out on the short end.

To all of these types of lost people, even to the biggest of losers, God is shown to be the One who will not stop seeking. God is also the One who asks us to seek out those who are lost – the ones who have wandered away as well as the ones who are still right here in our midst. When Jesus tells these stories, he is pointing to God, which points back to Christ, and ought to point also to us. As followers of Christ, we should make ourselves frequent visitors to the Lost and Found department; because you never know what, or who, might be found there; and what kind of joyous party will follow. AMEN.

³ Robert Capon, "The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin"