

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church  
 "The Lost & Found"

Scripture: Luke 15:1-32, Psalm 14

Hymns: At the dawning of creation 248, God is so good, Choruses (It is the cry of my heart, I will sing of the mercies of the Lord, You are my all in all, Amazing Love), Lord of all hopefulness 748 (Slane)

March 19, 2017

Rev. Steve Filyk

Young children tend to lose things.

Which means that their parents,  
 Their parents are often searching through the lost & found.

Our oldest daughter Isobel

Received some new gloves for Christmas.  
 We always seem to be in short supply  
 So Santa wisely provided an extra pair.

But in less than a month those new gloves were AWOL, missing.

We scoured the entire house.  
 We checked her school and daycare.

We looked everywhere we could think to look,

But they had disappeared into thin air.

It is frustrating when your kids lose something brand new.

It is frustrating when they don't honor your hard-earned dollars.  
 So we made sure that Isobel knew  
 to keep better eyes on her things...

And then mom went out and bought

TWO brand new pairs of gloves.

Well wouldn't you know it,

only a week later the lost gloves reappeared.  
 One day Dad opened his gym bag  
 and they were staring right at him.

I had put them in my bag

While Isobel went swimming.  
 And I forgot to give them back later.

As you can imagine I was little embarrassed

For the lectures and for the forgetting.  
 But I didn't try to save face by sneaking them into the  
 garbage.

After all that looking I was glad they were found.

Today we heard a trilogy of Jesus' parables.

And it is easy to quickly identify with the first two:  
 The experience of searching for what is lost  
 And the joy of rediscovery.

Can you think of something you were searching for recently—

Nothing quite like finding it again!

But while those parables draw us in,

The details provide a little grit, a little friction,  
 A little dissonance  
 Between their world and ours.

Take for instance that shepherd.

That shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness,

a wilderness filled with danger and wild beasts,  
 To track down one measly lamb.

Many of us would consider this unwise and irresponsible.

Why risk the whole herd  
 For a single wayward lamb?

Or consider that woman.

We know the anguish of losing something valuable.  
 And we know the joy of recovery.

But few of us would throw a celebration  
 That might cost more  
 than we had *almost* lost!

While we can identify with searching for what is lost  
 While we can identify with the joy of rediscovery  
 the relentless, dogged determination  
 and the excessive joy of Jesus' parables  
 Are outside our everyday experience.

That is until we realise  
 That Jesus isn't talking about lost sheep or lost coins,  
 Jesus is talking about people.

PAUSE

Jesus is talking about people.  
 Jesus tells these parables because he is being criticised  
 About the company that he is keeping.  
 Jesus has invited those with ears to hear, to listen to him.  
 And the tax collectors and sinners have gathered around.

Jesus is talking about people.

We see it in the punch line.  
 Each parable ends with the statement  
 About a party kicking off in heaven  
 "every time [a] soul turns to God."<sup>i</sup>

So does this help understand the determination and the joy  
 We witness in these parables?

Maybe...

We value people, right?  
 We all pay attention when the police put out an Amber Alert.  
 We all breathe a sigh of relief when the missing child is  
 found.

And yet Jesus isn't talking about  
 The cute and innocent kids  
 We had searching for stuffies this morning  
 (referring to the children's story).

The 'lost' people Jesus is speaking about are society's deviants,  
 People who flouted everyone's rules and expectations,  
 And left a trail of pain and suffering  
 in their wake.

The 'tax collectors', they took jobs working for the occupying Romans.  
 Not only were they collaborators  
 They took advantage of their position  
 and overcharged their countrymen.

They got rich off the backs of the poor.

The 'sinners', they were those "who deliberately and persistently  
 transgressed the requirements of the law."<sup>ii</sup>

People who made their living off peoples' vices.  
 The likes of money-lenders and prostitutes.<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus is spending time with these bad hombres.  
 Not only is he teaching them, but he's having meals with them.  
 He is giving them a warm welcome before they  
 Have demonstrated their commitment  
 to a reformed life.<sup>iii</sup>

His justification, his parables, tell us that the search  
 for such people is important,  
 that their recovery is worth celebrating.

He says that in heaven,  
 and heaven is where things work properly,  
 He says that in heaven there is a big party  
 When one lost soul turns to God.<sup>iv</sup>

Well can we endorse that?  
 Are we committed as a church or as individuals  
 to this mission of Jesus?

Can we celebrate bringing such reprobates  
 Back into the fold?

PAUSE

Most of us can probably think of one of those types in our own families.  
 A 'black sheep': a prodigal, reprobate, ne'er-do-well.  
 People who reject others' expectations  
 And leave a trail of damage behind them.

On my dad's side we have an uncle.  
 For the sake of this sermon, I'll call him Uncle Terry.

Over the years Uncle Terry has managed to alienate  
 nearly everyone in the extended family.

He once got his brother Jack so mad  
 That Jack brother put sugar in the gas tank  
 Of Terry's rental car.

Now most troublemakers you can avoid  
 But Uncle Terry was a shareholder in the family business  
 So there was an annual requirement for the family  
 To meet with him.

It was never a fun time.  
 He always had his own agenda.  
 He would never consider the needs of others.

He liked to be in control.  
 He liked to manipulate.  
 And he was extraordinarily mean  
 when he didn't get what he wanted.

Last year I ended up at the family business meeting,  
 Because both my father and brother were afraid of him.

It was just one meeting.  
 But it ended in a shouting match.

In the end the family took Uncle Terry to court  
 To wrap up the family business.  
 Everyone wanted to escape the grip he had on their lives.

PAUSE

So why am I telling you this story?  
 I'm just highlighting the challenge of the Gospel  
 The challenge of Jesus' parables.

While I am happy  
 That Uncle Terry is finally out of our lives,  
 Jesus is telling me that God is busy searching for him.

So what does this say about God?  
 And what does this say about me?

This incongruity suggests  
 That maybe I don't like the Gospel  
 As much as I claim to.

Or that maybe despite  
 My ability to get along with most people  
 And outwardly look respectful  
 There is something fundamentally 'lost' about me.

Could it be that while God is searching  
 for broken and hurtful people like Uncle Terry  
 God is also searching for proud and self-righteous people  
 like me?

The Good News, is that if this is true,  
 Is that God regards me, God regards us all as his beloved children.  
 God's put on the Amber alert  
 For the Uncle Terry's AND their frustrated families  
 and won't give up searching until we are  
 home.

PAUSE

So let me ask you,  
 who is that lost sheep in your family.  
 Someone you haven't talked to in a long while.

Think to yourself:  
 Who is that person?

Now find a piece of paper:  
 Write a few sentences that express  
 Your best and most gracious hopes for that person  
 Something that expresses something  
 of the searching God's love for them.

Take that paper home with you.

Later today, if you can do this with integrity,  
 And if you can do without endangering yourself,  
 Try putting those words into a text or an email or a letter  
 To that person.

Send it with a prayer  
 that God may work out God's purposes in their life.

Maybe little acts like these  
 Will help us understand our common need  
 Not for justice,  
 but for mercy and grace.

May God's will be done on earth  
 As it is in heaven.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 15:10 NRSV

<sup>ii</sup> see Jirair S. Tashjian "Tax Collectors and Sinners" [www.crivoice.org/tax.html](http://www.crivoice.org/tax.html)

<sup>iii</sup> John. R. Donahue *The Gospel in Parable* 147 speaks of the overtones of religious acceptance

<sup>iv</sup> see N. T. Wright *Luke for Everyone* 18