

I called my dad the other day to ask him if he remembered the time that I got lost at the Walmart in Riverdale near my childhood home. You see, I was young enough at the time that the details of that event aren't super clear to me, but I very much remember the event itself. Mostly I remember that at one point I was with my dad and the next, I wasn't. And then I remember sitting with a woman in a red vest (because that's what they wore at Walmart in the 90s), and just waiting for my dad to come get me. The thing is, it wasn't until my dad showed up that it dawned on me that I had been lost. What I mean is, I don't remember being afraid. I don't remember worrying. The idea that I might be lost never crossed my mind.

As you can imagine, the experience was very different for my dad. He too remembers that at one point I was with him and the next minute I wasn't. But unlike me, who wasn't even convinced that I was lost, my dad began to search frantically for me. He was looking in the middle of the clothes racks, he was searching up and down aisles, he was calling out my name, desperately searching for me. When I asked him what that memory was like for him, he said it was terrifying. That his mind was racing and his breathing was shallow, as he panicked over the thought of not finding me.

I think that it's a very different experience to be the one who is lost versus the one who has lost someone or something. Not that being lost doesn't come with its own set of emotions. It can be a terrifying thing to be lost. But it seems that there's a different kind of fear that takes hold when you are the one is searching for what is lost. Something about losing that which you love just hits differently – deeper, even. And so when you lose what is dear to you, you find that you'll do anything to find what is lost, even if it's reckless, even if it doesn't make sense. Which I think that's the point Jesus is making to the Pharisees in this text. The Pharisees see the kind of people Jesus draws – sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes – all the wrong kind of people in their opinion. And rather than sending them away, Jesus welcomes them in and even eats with them – signs that he accepts them. And that's where they have a problem. Jesus accepts them, even before they show any signs of change, transformation, and a commitment to living differently. Jesus accepts them as they are. He loves them as they are.

You see, I don't think that we can understand or appreciate the ever-expanding mercy and love of Christ, unless we can put ourselves in the position of the one who has lost something. Often times, we think of these parables from the perspective of being lost – that we are the lost sheep and the lost coin. And there's a good reason for that. But as to why Jesus welcomes and eats with all the “wrong people”, we can only appreciate that when we recognize just how much it grieves God to have lost that which God so loves. We can only begin to comprehend the fringes of mercy when we realize the lengths to which Christ goes to find that which is lost.

My friends in Christ, I don't know about you, but after the events of these past weeks – the violence in North Carolina and Texas and Utah and right here in Evergreen, Colorado – I suspect that many have begun to realize that we are a bit lost right now – culturally, socially, emotionally. There's been many who have wondered at how we could possibly be in such a time as this, that this is not who we are. And yet, I would argue that becoming aware of being lost doesn't mean you weren't lost before. I was lost at Walmart, even when I didn't think I was. And the thing is, the events of these past weeks and months and years are not signs that we have become lost, but representations of the fact that we have always been lost. It's what we do as human beings. In the words of the old hymn, “prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.” We are lost sheep. We are lost coins. We are lost children of God. And that has always been the way of things in this broken world. The past weeks of events don't determine that, but reveal what has always been the truth of our nature.

And yet, that is not the end of the story. That we are lost is not the end of the story. There is still the One who searches for us in the midst of our brokenness. There is still the One who comes to us again and again. There is still the One who will not cease until we are wrapped in the arms of love and mercy again. In a week that has left a lot of us feeling empty and confused and even angry, in a word, lost, there is no benefit to pointing fingers and casting judgment of fault for why we are where we are. Arguing about how we got lost will not help us to be less lost. And so what are we as people of faith to do in times like these? Well, for me the comfort of times like these comes in the knowledge and trust that God still searches for us. Because sometimes when we are lost, we don't recognize it as such. We continue on without realizing that we have gone astray. But when we do realize that we are lost, perhaps the most comforting reassurance is that we won't be lost forever – that God is always coming to us. That God still acts and moves and breathes life and goodness and holiness into this broken world. That just as a shepherd would search relentlessly for one lost sheep, as a woman would turn her whole house upside down to search for one lost coin, that Christ would welcome and accept and dine with those lost ones, God still searches for us, calling us home, calling us back into the fold of mercy, calling us back to the pathways of love and forgiveness and grace.

To some, that may seem a naïve platitude. And maybe it is. But when you are lost and you know you are lost and you can't work your way out of being lost, then what else do we have but to know that there is one searching for us. My friends in Christ, God will not cease in searching for us. And we as people of faith, must keep our eyes attentive and our hearts open to the ways God is near to us – great and small. For that is where we will be led out of our lostness. That is where we will rediscover what it means to love and be loved as Christ has loved. That is when we will know the power and importance of the ever-expanding mercy and grace of God.