

September 16, 2007

Scripture readings: Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28; Luke 15: 1-10

Sermon title: "The Intense Search for the Lost"

Probably every one of you has, at one time or another, frantically searched for something lost, and hopefully you have found the lost item. I would imagine that most intense searches for lost items are for things that are precious to the one searching. Sometimes, however, intense searches are for emergent things. For example, I remember way back in the days when smoking was allowed on airplanes, hearing my sister-in-law tell about a rather frustrating flight she had. She was on an early flight from southern California into Seattle, and she couldn't wait to get a cup of coffee on the plane, since she really hadn't had any coffee before boarding this pre-dawn flight. Just as the flight attendants appeared at the front of the plane with the coffee cart, a passenger just a couple of rows away from the coffee cart dropped her lit cigarette into her seat.

Now, this may not seem like a big deal at first hearing to you and me, but it created an instant emergency on that particular flight. A lit cigarette had fallen into a fabric lined seat in a pressurized, oxygenated cabin area of an airplane 30,000 feet above the earth. Thank goodness the fabric used on the seat was flame retardant. Even so, the scenario that quickly played through the minds of everyone on that flight was that the lost cigarette would spark a flame that could instantly burst into a cabin-wide ball of fire, using up limited oxygen and filling the cabin with choking smoke.

All the flight attendants rushed to that particular seat, some with fire extinguishers. They began to systematically tear apart the seat that supposedly hid the lost smoldering cigarette. They were careful and deliberate, yet speedy. They were trying to prevent what could become a major catastrophe. But they couldn't find that cigarette, at least not quickly. This was not my dear sister-in-law's concern, however. She was totally focused on the stationary coffee cart, forgotten at the front of the plane in all of the commotion. She never did get her cup of coffee on that flight, even though she could smell it and see it. The long and arduous search for the lit cigarette took up most of the remaining flight time, and the usual niceties such as coffee or snacks went by the wayside. It was quite a price to pay for a lost cigarette, at least for persons dependent upon starting their day with a cup of coffee.

Now not all lost things require that kind of attention. Most lost items do not demand the attention and urgent action of everyone around. As a matter of fact, most lost things really don't matter much to anyone, except the person that has lost the item. If I lose the back of an earring, I can bet I will be the only person that cares to look for it. If someone who wears contacts loses one of them, probably most people around will help look for it for a short time, or will at least have the courtesy to try to keep the contact from being stepped on by others. But after a while, the courtesy of others wears away into something like, "Oh well. It's just lost. I need to go back to work now," leaving only the owner of the lost contact with any motivation to continue to look for the elusive contact. Very often, if a lost item just isn't found quickly, the owner of the item will reach a point when

searching further seems like a waste of time. The owner will come to a time when he or she cuts losses and gives up the search.

Today's gospel lesson reveals two parables about lost things. They are the first two of a set of three parables about lost things that are found. The third parable, which is right after today's lesson, is the one about a father that never gives up on a prodigal son, one who is lost, but then is found. There is a celebration when that lost son returns to his father, just as there is joy and celebration when a lost sheep and a lost coin are recovered in the first two parables.

What causes Jesus to tell these three parables of lost things being found? He has, in at least three chapters of Luke right before this, told of the need to repent and reorient one's life. He has outlined the costliness of discipleship, its hardships and its demands. He has healed people in various ways, and these healings have created bad feelings and conflict between the religious authorities and Jesus, since Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. Jesus has been invited to dinner by one of the prominent religious leaders, and he confronts the guests with their need for humility and with their failure to care for the weak and the marginalized people of the town. There has been judgment and demand and conflict in this narrative of the ministry of Jesus. But now, in chapter 15, Jesus offers pictures of the mercy of God, of the relentless concern and care of God, and of the joy of God whenever lost ones are found. And this comes in the middle of grumbling. The religious authorities are grumbling because Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Ah yes, sinners. Those to be avoided by the righteous. Certainly good people would avoid contact with sinners in the marketplace and the streets of the town, but most certainly in one's home! Any devout Jew of that day would know that God calls the Jews to separate themselves from the unholy ones of the world. But here is this Jesus who goes out of his way to welcome such people, and then he even sits down and eats with them! Breaking bread together was a big deal in the society of first century Palestine. One of the key issues that caused the religious authorities to reject John the Baptizer was his table practice. He ate no bread and drank no wine, it is reported. In other words, he did not have table fellowship with anyone. He was branded a weird loner. Then Jesus was also criticized for his practices around the table. He ate and drank with everyone, so he was written off as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." So the dinner table was central to that culture, and breaking bread together was the act of fully embracing a person or a people. Who would and could eat with who was a big deal in the early church as well, in a society that was strictly stratified in the Roman world, and it was mind-blowing that Christians of various backgrounds and social status would sit down together for their agape meals, and serve one another in a statement that all people mattered to God, without regard to their background or their role in human society. And here is Jesus, beginning this remarkable practice of sitting down to eat with the avoidable people of his day.

So when Jesus overhears the recurring grumbling about his practice of sitting down for supper with all kinds of people, he is moved to tell this small series of parables about lost things. And though they are brief, they are rich with disturbing truths. They speak of

a God that is relentless and searching. This is a God that will not give up on lost things. 100 sheep are in a herd. One gets lost, but ninety nine are safe at the end of the day. How many human endeavors have a success rate of 99%? Not many. Most shepherds in such a situation might try to look quickly for one little lost sheep, but not many would search long and hard. Ninety nine safe sheep is pretty good. They are all safe in the pen tonight. Time for the shepherd to call it a day and go home for supper and a good night's sleep. One always hates to lose a sheep, but that's just an occupational hazard, isn't it?

And a woman loses one of her set of ten coins. How much of her day will she spend searching the house for it? There are lots of other responsibilities vying for her attention. Surely one coin out of ten is a loss, but she still has practically all of her set. With just a deft and quick hand, she can rearrange the row of coins on her scarf so that no one will notice the missing coin. Maybe it will turn up someday.

But the parables do not portray this human type of casual behavior. Just like the full alert of the flight attendants on that past airplane, looking for a smoldering cigarette, God is relentless in the search for God's missing ones. God does not see those so called sinners as just another number in the billions of human beings. God does not see a single one of them as insignificant. As a matter of fact, God throws a party when they are found, and all the indifferent and jaded neighbors are invited to celebrate the restoration of the lost ones. The onlookers are rattled out of their passive cynicism and are invited to be part of the joy of recovery and rediscovery.

And just in case the passively cynical hearers of these parables are not moved to go out and welcome the sinners of their world, Jesus really shakes up their ideas about righteousness and heavenly goodness. The figures in all three of these parables that portray God are themselves outside of the circle of religiously acceptable people. A shepherd, thought to be continuously impure because of constant contact with animals and dung and so forth, could not come into contact with a Pharisee. If that happened, the Pharisee would be rendered unclean, and would have to go through religious purification rites to be restored. A woman, not named as the wife of anyone in particular, could not come into contact with a righteous Pharisee because she too would render the Pharisee as unclean. As a matter of fact, many Pharisees prided themselves that they would not even look at a woman that was not of their household, even if that woman was directly in front of them in the street. A father, horribly shamed by the choices and behavior of a son, surely could not be considered for any kind of position or rank in the synagogue, or if he was, he would need to totally disown the prodigal son, never to accept him again.

But the figures in the story that play the role of God are a shepherd, a woman, and a shamed father. All of these avoidable people are held up as having the characteristics of God, and they are most like God when they persist in their love, when they refuse to disown or give up upon the lost, even if the search to restore the lost one comes at a great price.

I have to wonder if any of the hearers of these parables slept well on the first night after they heard these things. The whole idea of desiring undesirable ones instead of

giving up on them and avoiding them! The whole idea that God might be present in the lives of a dirty shepherd, a woman with a broom, and a shamed father! This was all outside of their concept of God and of how God behaves.

And these parables continue to challenge our ideas about the love of God. Who are the untouchables today that have a glimmer of the image of God in them? Have we bothered to see their divine spark, or have we totally written them off? What of those of a differing sexual orientation? They are up against a lot of shunning these days. What about all of those, well, you know, all of those non-English speaking people? Those crowds of refugees, those rag-tag and starving victims of war, or tsunami, or famine, or earthquake or AIDS epidemic? Do we see the image of God within them, do we see their value as God the Creator of us all sees them, and do we care to reach out to them with the relentlessness of a God that never gives up on a single one of us? And if we do reach out, and if there is a response, if there is a movement toward our outstretched hand, are we with it enough to be ecstatically joyful?

Well, I don't know about you, but I am feeling pretty joyful today after hearing this good news. I am joyful that God doesn't give up on me, that God cares enough to correct me when I am wrong, and cares enough to keep coming after me. I am joyful that God surprises me when I get kind of fossilized in my ideas of right and wrong, and opens me to all kinds of depths of compassion and concern and insight about what it means to really love others like God loves us. I am joyful, in spite of seeing others being shoved aside wrongly, for I know that God will not allow that to happen indefinitely, and, like Jeremiah's time, there will be a reckoning and a correcting of such things, and God calls me to help with that correcting and justice-making, hard as that may be. Yes, I am joyful, for I know that the God that won't give up on our woeful world, and God won't desert us, even when we feel abandoned. Like a persistent shepherd that checks every rocky outcrop, like a frantic woman with a far reaching broom, like a tender Dad that always watches the horizon for a bad kid, God will stay with us through all things.

I invite you to join in that joy. I invite you to celebrate in your life the God of lost causes and the God who won't go away, the God who is going to see each one of us safely home. Share that amazing joy with the world around you. God literally knows, the world needs it! Amen.