

Lost and Found
Luke 15:1-10

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A group of boys and girls were trying to find a game to play. "Why don't we play Hide and Seek?" asked Billy. "No way," said Sally. "I'm afraid I'll get hid and nobody will be able to find me. Then everybody will go home and I will be lost."

"Lost and Found." It's such a common predicament that the classifieds run a special section for it each day. In Nashville this weekend somebody lost a small, black, fluffy, female cat near Thompson Lane. Somebody else found a silver-grey Schnauzer Terrier dog around the Coronada Condos. Lost and found is a part of our lives everyday.

To be lost is to be misplaced, mislaid, or missing. To be lost is to be where you are not supposed to be. Jesus was concerned about the lost and found. He was so concerned that he told a trilogy of stories about lost things. A sheep is lost. A coin is misplaced. A boy runs away from home. The Bible never gets more personal than here in Luke 15. So I want to spend a couple of weeks bringing these parables to life, to speak to us in the depths of our lives and to help us to understand something about this business of being lost and found.

WHY ARE PEOPLE LOST? Consider the reasons. We, like sheep, have this problem of nibbling. So there was ninety and nine that were safe in the fold but one sheep had gone astray. In Isaiah 53:6 we read "*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.*"

The number one reason people give for dropping out of church is that they just got out of the habit. I'll tell you how to simplify your weekends. Stop making church a choice and start making it a habit. If you make a habit of doing it, then it gets a lot easier. End the hassle of "Will we?" or "Won't we?" Just form the good habit of coming where the spiritual food is served.

Temptations attract us. Grass looks greener on the other side. The late Johnny Cash said of his early life, "I used drugs to escape and they worked pretty well when I was younger, but they devastated me physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I couldn't communicate with God. There is no place more lonely on earth that one could be." People nibble their way lost.

Busyness binds us; we are busy people. We wear our busyness as a badge of importance. We have things to do, places to go. We are not bad people; we just don't know how to establish priorities so we nibble here and wander there, drawn by grass that looks greener on the other side, driven by work that we think we can finish in just one more hour, controlled by kids engaged in one more activity.

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,

Prone to leave the God I love.

I suppose everyone here has felt that sometime in their lives. We are lost because we nibble our way away from the flock like sheep out in pasture. We are lost sometimes because owners have this problem of neglecting. Was it the coin's fault that it was lost? Certainly not; the coin couldn't help it; it wasn't its problem that it was lost. It was somebody else's problem.

I lost my wedding ring once in my car. I was driving home alone from Atlanta, playing country music loud, fiddling with my ring to the beat of the music when I dropped it. I never could find it. I even had a car dealer searching for it. I didn't want to face up to the music when Sandy would ask, "You've been away on a business trip so now where is your wedding ring?" What could I say? I just didn't want to face that question, but it came anyway. "And why aren't you wearing your wedding ring?" I tried to get out of it the best that I could. "Well, that old wedding ring you gave me was so round that when it drops it tends to roll. By the law of gravity and the theory of relativity it slipped away and I just couldn't find it." She didn't buy it.

It is forever a pain to me that as long as I stand in the pulpit, certain persons will not sit in the pew.

Somebody got sick and I didn't show.

Somebody got a divorce and I didn't know.

Somebody got lost in the crowd of things, shuffled aside in the clutter of things, there but no one noticed. They were absent but not missed.

We are experts at blaming others when in reality we must share the load.

I got a letter this week from an inactive member. "Our church has become too social and too political for my taste," he said. Then he went on to explain the real reason for becoming inactive. "I used to usher and my wife used to sing in the choir, but when we made the move to the new sanctuary (which tells you how long he has been gone) we got lost in the shuffle. We felt shut out by our Sunday school class and we slowly just quit coming. I started playing golf on Sundays and felt a closeness to God that I didn't feel in church. Classify me as you wish, but until I feel a sense of fulfillment from church, I probably will keep playing golf."

People are lost to narcissism. Some people cannot think beyond **me** or **my**. A certain man had two sons and the younger said to his father, "Give me my share of the estate." We Westerners fail to realize the request was equivalent to telling his father to drop dead. It is a heartless rejection of a family in which the boy was nurtured.

While I will have much more to say about this story next week, suffice it now to note that the little story is laced with seventy-six personal pronouns. The son was content to talk about me, about my, and about I, I, I. He had big needs, big ego,

and big determination, so he set out to do it his way. He cannot continue to be in the community any longer.

People all wrapped up in themselves make mighty small packages. Put your ego on the block and someone will knock it off for you even in church. It will just happen again and again. People get lost. We nibble our way lost. We are neglected at some urgent moment in our lives and we feel let down and disappointed or we are simply selfish and are trying to fill our own ego needs and so we go our own direction and do our own thing.

HOW ARE PEOPLE FOUND? That is what these two stories are about. Is it not true?

We Search. The good shepherd searches for the one lost sheep until he finds it. There are ninety and nine safe in the fold, but there is one that is lost. Percentage-wise they are doing very well. If I could get ninety-nine percent of the membership of this church, we would not have room to put them on Sunday morning. We would say ninety-nine percent is extremely good, but God does not work by percentages. He works by name, by individuals, by particular concerns of particular people and as long as there is one, all of heaven is concerned. It results in a search and rescue mission.

On Wednesday, July 24, 2002, nine Pennsylvania miners were trapped 240 feet underground. For three days Americans followed the drama hoping and praying for a miracle. Within twenty-four hours of the disaster the rescuers successfully lowered an air pipe to where they believed the miners were. By banging on the pipe the miners signaled that they were alive. Only about a third of the way into the solid granite a 1500 pound drill bit broke. One miner later said, "We fought despair when the drilling stopped." He found a pen and wrote a good-bye note to his family. Rescuers would not give up. Eventually they reached the miners and lifted each one to safety to the thundering applause of colleagues, reporters and family.

Simply stated the Church must recover its search and rescue mission, return to its apostolic roots, and start caring for lost people. That is our mission. As long as there is one, all heaven is concerned.

Mike Breaux, former pastor of Southland Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky made a habit of eating at a local sports bar. People recognized him from his television ministry. One day as he was leaving, a customer spoke up and said, "Thanks, Mike, for eating with sinners like us."

If we become concerned for the lost we will spend more time in bars and less time in board rooms, more time outside the church and less time inside the church. Do you have good friends who are unbelievers? You are the volunteers we need for this mission. Jesus was about a search and rescue mission. He went to hunt for the one that was lost.

We Sweep. Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds them?

My mother used to do spring house cleaning. Covers, quilts, and bedding were all carried outside for fresh air. Every stick of furniture was moved; every nook and cranny was scrubbed and cleaned.

Churches can use a good house cleaning. We get stuffy and stuck in our ways. Our rituals become a religion; our customs become creeds. If we are not careful we become more in love with the dwelling place of God than the deity of God. If we have any concern for the 65–70 million unchurched Americans we will clean up our own act, examine our own attitudes, repent of our own sins, and open wide the doors that all God’s children may come in.

We Can Sit and Wait. The prodigal decides to arise and go to his father. What was it about his leaving that he left in such a way that there was an invitation, an open door for him to come back? What made him believe the father would be waiting?

Kathy is a successful stock broker in Minneapolis who makes friends easily and has the gift of evangelism. She goes to the pool in her apartment complex, settles into a chaise lounge, reads a book, and eventually strikes up a conversation with whoever sits next to her. Soon the two become friends. Kathy then naturally talks about her faith. Bringing her new friends to church is a regular practice. The church was so impressed with her efforts that they wanted Kathy to serve on the evangelism committee: “Why should I spend hours with other Christians when I can sit by the pool and represent Christ?” she asked. We can sit and wait. There is power in that.

When our boys were teenagers, going out into the night, we regularly sent them off with these words: “We’ll leave the light on for you.” We wanted them to find their way home. Maybe it’s time the Church turned up the lights.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I’m found;
T’was blind but now I see.*

May I leave you with two questions?

How much do you care about lost people?
What are you going to do about it?

