

Lessons for Living a Life: Search and Be Found

*A sermon preached on Luke 15:1-10 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 15, 2019*

I.

Several times a year at my son's school, the front fence lining the playground looks like the clearance rack at Target on a sale day. Hoodies, rain jackets, hats, gloves, headbands, cardigans, and a cape or two are stuffed into the holes of the fence where they hang. Water bottles in every style and color line the ground in little mounds of colorful plastic and stickers and germs. It's the time of year where the lost and found department moves outside — in full view of parents and visitors and staff and kids — so that what once was lost could soon be found.

When I first experienced this event last year, I think I quickly moved through a range of responses — from laughter over such a sight, to appreciation for such a clever way to clean out and send home, and then to embarrassment that my kid's dirty laundry was hanging out there for all to see. *There's Liam's SpiderMan hoodie he's been asking about! And there's his green water bottle! Oh lord, is my kid going to grow up unable to keep up with his stuff? And am I one of those parents who can't keep up my stuff too?* I grabbed his things quickly, practically looking around to see if anyone saw me do it. Perhaps it had been a stressful afternoon.

But the next day when I dropped Liam off, once again in view of a fence-full of adolescent left-behinds, it hit me — all the rest of these kids and families had lost their items too. Everyone, it seems, had a part in that which

was lost. It wasn't just me. And what better way to find that which is lost than to gather them up and put them out where everyone can see?

II.

We join Jesus in the middle of the story, right at the fence line of lost objects and lost people, where today, he tells a parable of a lost sheep and a lost coin. Parables, you remember, are short stories, using daily objects or familiar ideas, that have the power to instruct, to change, to motivate, and to add meaning to the lives of the hearer. And here in Luke 15, we encounter these familiar parables, these stories of lost sheep and a lost coin. Familiar to some of us as the lead-in for that most beloved of all Jesus's parables — the story of the lost, or prodigal, son — but recognizable to all of us who share that most human of experiences of being lost.

As worship began today, you remembered a time in your life when you were lost — perhaps lost in a crowd or lost on the road. From a more literal lostness to an emotional one, perhaps your lostness is the obvious kind, the kind of tax collectors and sinners, the kind that looks like that fence at my son's school with the dirty laundry just hanging right out there for all to see. It begins with suffering, a trauma, a particular grief or absence that makes our very being long for something to fill, to calm, to make right, to complete. We go looking for ourselves anywhere but within. We look in the nightcaps with pours that get more generous by the hour. We look in the mirror where lines and spots and bags indicate advancing worthlessness rather than advancing age. We look in the schedule and surroundings so jam-packed with people and needs and tasks and to dos that we run ourselves around and around chasing away the inevitable terror of being alone. We look in all the

respectable ways — advancing at work, promoting self or ideas online, pushing kids to greater success, leaving for this vacation or that trip — only to realize that in the end, we are nothing if not lost.

It's like that story of the woman who went missing in an Icelandic canyon. She had been part of a group on a tour bus traveling from site to site, and as they stopped in the Eldgja volcano, soon word got out that there was a missing passenger. The woman, you see, had changed clothes and didn't recognize the description of herself. What was she to do other than to join in the search? It took them until about 3am to call off the search, the time noted by the journalist who told this story, "when it became clear that the missing woman was, in fact, accounted for and searching for herself."¹

So familiar, right? For who among us hasn't longed for the gaze of a shepherd to land upon us when we are stuck in our heads, tangled in our bad choices, entrenched in the wilderness of our grief? Who among us hasn't yearned to be sought after so thoroughly that no corner of our lives, or space between this and that is free of the sacred sweep to catch and capture? Who among us hasn't dreamt of being pulled from our places of darkness into the light and grasp of our discoverer? Who among us hasn't ached for the strong arms of a shepherd to scoop us up, brush us off, comfort and cradle us until at last we find our way home?

For no matter who you are, you have been lost. And no matter who you are, God is so persistent in the hunt, so diligent in the search, so thorough in the pursuit that there will be no rest, no stopping, no obstacle that can get in the way of you being found. That's just what God does. That's just who God is.

¹ "Missing' woman mystery solved," QMI Agency news report. Shared by dear friend Alan Sherouse and on Twitter here: <https://twitter.com/SarahPinborough/status/1171861951275831296>

As one wise Christian says, “God’s talent for finding us proves greater than our talent for getting lost.”²

But even in this promise, this posture of God who searches like a shepherd and sweeps like a housewife — all until the one who is lost has been found — we cannot overlook what this says about God. **For not only is God a God who searches, God is a God who counts.** As Jesus tells it, the shepherd knows the one is missing because he has counted the flock! He didn’t ask the sheep to count off or painted numbers on their back. The shepherd knew one was missing because he counted, and seemingly was counting all the time. The woman knows her day’s wage is missing because she has counted her coins! She takes responsibility for losing the coin and goes looking immediately. For in this realm, nothing — and no one — is too insignificant to count and be counted. Everyone matters to God. Everyone is worthy of being found.³

God searches, God counts, God finds, and God celebrates! For in the end, in the finding, in the discovery, there is nothing short of full, exultant, jubilant celebration! And that’s the kind of God God is! One who calls all the neighbors and throws a ridiculous party for sheep and coin, one who insists on calf and robe and ring for the child who was dead and has come back to life, one who rejoices over every last one who God finds.

Here’s where I wonder about the second part of this passage, the second reminder. Not only are we all lost and then found by God, but then,

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Lost and Found Department,” *The Preaching Life*, p147.

³ With gratitude to Amy Jill-Levine’s work on these parables — in particular her reminder that God is a counter! — from *Short Stories by Jesus* and our Common Table Bible Study for their wrestling with these in particular!

we too are invited to join the divine search party and be one who finds God in the finding! We can join God in the wilderness, in the brush, in the sweeping reach across the world. We can join God who counts and measures and seeks and finds. We can join God in noticing who is missing and doing something about it. We can join in the unconventional, unconditional rejoicing when one who is lost is found. For God is a God of invitation! What might it be like if we who have experienced the grace of being found join in the sacred search party of God for those who are still lost?

III.

A friend of mine had an experience like this one. He's a pastor too and was getting ready to leave the church – hurrying home to pick up his son for basketball practice. That's when he heard that a woman had come to the church's front desk, asking if anyone had seen a little boy. You see, a 2-yr-old had wandered off his front porch right there in the church's neighborhood, and his mother couldn't find him anywhere. When he was called, he wasn't responding to his name, and no one knew what to do.

When he told this story to his congregation, he stopped here and said: "Now, take a breath, I won't make this a dramatic story, I want you to know up front that the little boy was found. But at that moment, we just didn't know, and it would be getting dark soon."

"Well, what would you do?," he said. "When you hear something like that, you don't just go home and pick up your own child for basketball practice. The lost child becomes your child. So we emptied out of the church to help with the search. Police were everywhere, clearly prioritizing the situation. I began to circle the neighborhood as part of a large net along with

nearly everyone else that had heard the news: the family on their way to the park, whose children had dropped their scooters and now ran throughout the neighborhood looking... the woman out walking her dog, who now walked furiously and frenzied through her neighbors' backyards looking for any trace... the people down at the tavern, who set down their happy hour drinks (or most of them did, at least!) to fan out and help... and the staff of our church that had not yet gone home, driving in circles, this small squadron of mid-sized SUVs... everyone looking, bending and stretching to see every angle, going to where they thought others might not have thought to look. Throughout the neighborhood, everyone cupping their hands and shouting his name.”

“After a while I remembered it was basketball practice night here at the church, so I pulled up to an officer and said, “Sir, I don’t know if it would help, but we have a whole gym full of people that would empty out and help, just say the word...” and that’s when the officer told me they thought he’d been found. So we waited around to confirm, and heard how a city bus driver had noticed him on the corner, stopped, and taken him back to the station, calling the police. Everyone was finally able to celebrate that this little boy was now home. So we all returned to whatever we’d been doing – walking the dog, or commuting home, or enjoying happy hour, or going to pick up my son for basketball practice – but not before it struck me how long it had been since I was a part of anything so large and important and clear. We all knew what we were supposed to do, regardless of other plans we had made,

or priorities we might have had. All of us knew what we were supposed to do, because a child was lost.”⁴

IV.

This experience of being part of something so large and important and clear makes me think it’s not a coincidence that Jesus tells these parables to the religious elite, grumbling about Jesus’s presence among those so clearly lost. But you know, it seems to me that those sinners and tax collectors maligned by the grumbling religious elite had something figured out, right? Were they not sitting and eating and fellowshiping with Jesus? Were they not the ones who had come close while the religious leaders stood back to whisper, complain, point, and generally give them the side-eye? Who here is lost, and who here is found?

I wonder what it might be like if from our experiences of being lost and found by God, instead of hanging back and grumbling about those who are still stuck in their wilderness or stowed away in dark corners, what if instead we joined God in the great search party of finding? What if we got on our knees, and swept the room, and looked behind trees, and wouldn’t stop until we found those in need of God’s abundant, lavish, offensive grace and mercy. That’s the kind of celebration I know I’d want to be part of. That’s the kind of church I’d want to be part of too.

What might happen?

For I once was lost, but now I — and we — are found! Amen!

⁴ With gratitude to Rev. Alan Sherouse for this beautiful story!