

## “Lost and Found”

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Text: Luke 15:1-10

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A man absolutely hated his wife’s cat and decided to get rid of him one day by driving him 20 blocks from his home and leaving him at the park.

As he was getting home, the cat was walking up the driveway.

The next day he decided to drive the cat 40 blocks away. He put the beast out and headed home.

Driving back up his driveway, there was the cat!

He kept taking the cat further and further and the cat would always beat him home. At last he decided to drive a few miles away, turn right, then left, past the bridge, then right again and another right until he reached what he thought was a safe distance from his home and left the cat there.

Hours later the man calls home to his wife. “Jen, is the cat there?”

“Yes,” the wife answers, “why do you ask?”

Frustrated, the man answered, “Put that [cat] on the phone, I’m lost and need directions!”

Being lost is no fun. Just ask the characters on ABC’s series “Lost.” For those of you who haven’t seen it – and I have not – the series follows the lives of plane crash survivors on a mysterious tropical island, after a passenger jet flying between Australia and the United States crashes somewhere in the South Pacific. The show’s been on for three seasons and will continue for three more, concluding in May 2010.

When you’re lost, it’s traumatic for your loved ones and friends. Thousands of volunteers are searching for aviator Steve Fossett, whose plane disappeared September 3 in Nevada. They’re looking for Fossett using satellite images. One of the volunteers said, “When you lose a friend or you have a friend in danger, you want to help. The computer, the pictures, allow me to assist in some way. You feel like you’re actually helping.”

I can’t honestly recall the last time I was really lost. A few weeks ago, after we’d taken Gretchen to school in Ohio, we drove into Cleveland to see the house where some of the scenes from the movie *A Christmas Story* had been filmed. We had directions, but the designated exit was closed, so we had to backtrack and find our way. We knew where we needed to be – we could see the neighborhood from the interstate – we just didn’t know how to get there from where we were. We drove around until we found the house.

Most of us go to great lengths to avoid being lost – many today utilize the Global Positioning System – GPS – to know where they are and keep from ending up lost. GPS utilizes information from satellites to triangulate the user’s exact location.

When we’re lost, we look for familiar things to get our bearings – the sun, stars, landmarks. Sometimes we stop and ask directions – even some men will do that.

Two hobbyists get into their balloon for an excursion. After a while, the wind unexpectedly picks up, and the balloon goes out of control. The two balloonists, with great effort, manage to keep the balloon stable, upright, and away from power lines. But they are lost. With more effort, they get the balloon near the ground. While floating over a country road, they see a man walking below. One of the balloonists calls down to him:

“We’re lost! Can you tell us where we are?”

The man thinks for a while, looks down, looks up, looks down again, stares into space for a minute, and then cries out:

“You’re in a balloon!”

It’s hard to be lost. It can be scary, frustrating. It can also be just as difficult to lose something. I suspect we all have a “lost and found” story to tell. Keys – an important document – luggage – wallet. Several years ago, while living in McPherson I lost my billfold. I looked every place I could think of and even in places where it couldn’t have been. I was preoccupied with trying to find it and got very little accomplished that

particular day. Early the next morning, it dawned on me where it might be. I jumped in the car and went to the church and sure enough it was right where I'd left it. I'd gone out of the locked doors of the church the day before and stuck my billfold in the door to keep it from locking and then I ended up going back in through another door.

I learned a few things that day about Jesus' parables. First, I was embarrassed by what I had done. My billfold didn't grow legs and walk off; no one took it from me. I couldn't blame anyone but myself. It was my fault and it was a stupid thing to do and the whole thing could have been avoided. I suspect the shepherd must have kicked himself. He only had to watch the sheep, how could he let one get away? Sure, there were 99 that were there and safe, but one was unaccounted for.

And how about the woman? She has only ten coins to her name. How could she lose ten percent of her cash? Surely she had some way of keeping them safe and secure. What happened? How could she be so careless?

How could I have been so careless with my billfold? When I was looking for it, I learned something about searching. At first, you're hopeful and eager. Each hill, each piece of furniture, each pants pocket, is bound to reveal the sheep, the coin, the billfold. Hope then turns to desperation. You start looking in impossible places because you just want to keep looking and you don't want to give up. Then you begin to feel that all hope is lost and you force yourself to consider the possibility that that which is lost is gone forever – that the flock will not be the same – that you'll have to figure out how to live on ninety percent of your nestegg – that you'll have to cancel the credit cards and apply for a new driver's license and you try to give up worrying about it. But then the discovery is made – the lost is found – and all seems right with the world. You want to call those who you'd worried and tell them and rejoice in your good fortune and resolve that this will never happen again. If I rejoice in a billfold being found, how much more is God relieved and thrilled when a sinner returns?

You know there's some important differences between these two parables and the one that follows – the parable of the lost son. In the Prodigal Son – the younger son makes a decision to sever his relationship with his father. He himself is responsible for getting lost. And he later "comes to himself" – he knows he's lost and decides to repent and return home. The one that was lost plays an active role in being found.

But that's not the case with these two parables from today's lesson. The sheep was just being a sheep when he got lost – it wasn't his fault – he didn't set out to separate from the 99. And the coin wasn't responsible for losing itself – it has no will – no mind of its own – it was the woman who was at fault. The sheep probably didn't know it was lost – and certainly the coin didn't either. And neither the sheep nor the coin contribute in any way to its being found.

Jesus told these stories when the Pharisees were upset over the company he kept. They would have been pleased if Jesus had called attention to the sins of the tax collectors and called them to repentance, but they were furious that he welcomed them into his circle and ate with them before they showed evidence of change.

They believed in a God of grace but were sure that God waited for the sinner to make the first move, to show some sign of regret. When they grumble about sharing Jesus' company with people who don't deserve to be there, He asks, "Which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" Now Jesus probably didn't thrill the Pharisees by comparing them to low-life shepherds, but no doubt they would agree that even a shepherd would search for a lost sheep, even though he had 99 more. Wouldn't God do the same? And while we wouldn't turn our houses upside down to find a penny, if you lost a check representing a day's wage, you'd certainly spend time looking for it. Jesus says that God searches, sweeps away what covers us, pulls us from corners, takes desperate measures, and rejoices when a sinner is found.

Jesus shows us a God who searches people out who don't even know they're lost. Do you know people like that? The headlines are full of them – people we read or hear about and what they've done, and we think to ourselves, "What is wrong with you people?" As Ann Landers used to say, "Wake up and smell the coffee." "You're headed down the wrong path – it's clear to everyone except you."

Jesus tells us that God cares deeply about people who don't have a clue. Jesus portrays a God who is conscious of when we ourselves don't have a clue – when we are messing up while thinking everything is fine

– a God who aches with regret and grief at the paths we choose for ourselves, who welcomes back sinners first, before they make any move, who has a party when even one repents.

These two parables are glimpses into the heart of God. They vividly illustrate God’s concern for those who lack the ability to recognize God in their life, and show how it is that God will look for and seek them. They show God’s determined concern to find the lost. In God’s eyes, each single individual human life is worth risking all that God has gained so that one more person may know the joy and happiness, love and forgiveness of being a child of God.

You know, I suppose the Pharisees were dumbfounded to discover that retrievals bring rejoicing. The shepherd doesn’t beat the lost sheep – he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. When the woman finds the coin – she celebrates – when the son comes home, the man throws a party. When someone is found, there’s an unbelievable celestial celebration. At God’s party, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are at the head table – and in the banquet hall there’s a 100 foot long banner with letters ten feet high spelling out the name of the found sinner. Our name is there, when we are found, even when we say in our heart of hearts, “Heaven ain’t throwing a party for the likes of me.”

God’s willingness to forgive is beyond our imagination – whatever condition we are in – God wants us to come home, whether or not we make the first move. God has an unbelievable intensity for the lost. God’s heart is always in the search mode – seeking the lost.

Evan Beckman, an aviations instructor at K-State Salina, is a close friend of Steve Fossett’s. Beckman has been relentless in his attempts to locate Fossett. He’s already viewed more than 1,400 satellite images in trying to find the lost aviator. Beckman told the *Kansas City Star*: “I’ll keep looking until we find him.” Whenever we’re lost, whether we know we’re lost or we don’t, God says about you and me: “I’ll keep looking until I find them.”

Let us pray: We are here because you invited us, sought us, came out to us, and embraced us. We are here because you are the sort of God who sent his only Son to seek and to save the lost. Lord, remind us that we are to spread the good news that you are still seeking the lost. We are not to hunker down here in our congregation, safe and secure among people like us. We are to be out, working with you, seeking those who have stopped seeking you, lifting up the downtrodden inviting everyone to the party called Sunday, called church, called the kingdom of God. Amen.

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