

GOD'S LOST AND FOUND
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luke 15: 8-10

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Cheryl came to see me because she was having difficulty sleeping through the night. Indeed, she would wake up at three or four in the morning weeping. She could not understand why. When I asked her if there were any difficult issues in her life, she said that she had contracted a liver disorder that was potentially life threatening. Her doctor was treating her aggressively, even as Cheryl was tending to her husband and two elementary aged children. She was working on a master's degree and had a full time job as a librarian. She believed she already had too much to think about without having to worry about the possibility of death.

"Anyway," she said, "I don't want my children to worry about any of this. It shouldn't get in the way of my marriage."

So we spend a few weeks talking about the fact that anxiety and fear had to have some way to express them selves. If waking her up at three o'clock in the morning was what it was going to take then she would need to plan of losing a lot of sleep. Cheryl decided that talking with her husband might also be one way to deal more effectively with the threat of death.

After a couple of months she told be about a dream she had since our last visit. In the dream Cheryl was putting on a pearl necklace that had been given to her by her

great grandmother. The necklace was a cherished family treasure. Cheryl wore it with pride. As she was putting on the necklace it broke apart. Pearls dropped to the floor. Some rolled under the bed and dresser. Others broke on impact. A few skittered into cracks and crevices, even the heater vent in the wood floor. They were lost and even though Cheryl searched for them she could not find them all. She thought she saw one glistening in the ductwork where she had shined her flashlight but it was too far out of reach.

I asked Cheryl what she thought the dream was teaching her. What did it mean? She replied that first of all she must gather up all of the pearls that she could find. She would restring the pearls with something stronger than a cotton string. The pearls that were broken would simply have to be swept up and thrown away. The lost pearls? Well, they were just lost and she would have to accept that fact. Cheryl was not certain which pearls were lost or broken. Their meaning would take some time to figure out. I asked if she had any clues about what just one pearl represented.

“One of the pearls that is broken,” Cheryl said, “is the idea that life is always safe and secure. I know now that is not true and I can never take life for granted.”

A few weeks later Cheryl called me to tell me that her disease was in remission and her life was no longer threatened.

When we hear stories about what is lost and found we are very quick to rush to the “found” column to celebrate the return and the reward. When the Christian tradition engages this theme we sprint to praise the recovery or salvation of the lost lamb, child, or sinner. The most recognized hymn, “Amazing Grace,” declares, “I once was lost but now am found.” The assumption is that the “saved” are now fully

recovered and restored and we need not dwell on the past. You recall the old fundamentalist saw, “Once saved, always saved.” We might quip, “Once found, always found.”

It is human nature to avoid the dark and chaotic. We prefer the warmth and light of home and hearth. We would appreciate it very much if the minister would remind us regularly of that which is secure, cuddly, and certain.

The Christian tradition has taken the stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son and assumed that Christ is the good shepherd who seeks lost souls and that the ministry of the church is the same. But I wonder if the Jesus tradition has less to do with saving lost souls, and more to do with embracing the lost in all of the conditions that disorient, distract, and mislead us. I would like to propose to you this morning that the kingdom of God is always set in the context of the lost, the fragmented, the uncertain, the insecure, the dark and shady sides of life. Yes, there are times when the halls are decorated, the lights are bright, the singing is robust, the tables are laden with food, and the spirits flow. But outside heavy clouds darken the sky, the roads are impassable, the winds howl, and sinister shadows stalk the forest. At some time we must leave the celebration and return to the world of disease, death, divorce, violence, and terror. And most frightening to me is the skulking boredom that hollows out the souls of human beings. The truth of the matter is that some will get lost on their way home. Some will be killed. Like my friend, some of the pearls are lost and some are broken and we are never sure which is which.

Let me put this another way. If you are looking for the kingdom of God it is not very likely that you are only going to find it in a chapel, church, or cathedral. It is

more likely than not that you will find it in the emergency room, classroom, soup kitchen, or clothing pantry. The attending clergy are not likely to be priests or ministers but nurses, social workers, teachers, firefighters, and volunteers at the homeless shelter.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I love to be inside a beautiful church. I love the pipe organ and the melody of the choir. I love the glow of candles and children's faces. I deeply appreciate the nobility of the liturgy. But I need the church for other and more important reasons. I need the church to remind me of the profound nobility of a child of God and take that nobility into an inglorious world. I need to be reminded to seek and sing harmony into a world that is so discordant. I need to be reminded to take my light into a darkened world. Believe it or not, I do not expect to find God in church very often. I expect the church to equip me in my search for God *in the world*. I do not expect Christ to be spending much time with the found. I expect to find Christ amongst the lost.

The parable of the lost coin is one example. A lot of people, including the ones in Jesus' audience, might expect to find the kingdom of God in the midst of religious or national power. We are prone to think that something as magnificent as God's kingdom would entail thrones, crown jewels, heralds, armies, and navies. Wouldn't a kingdom of ultimate power be so impressive that every other leader in the world would bow before that throne? Wouldn't ministers, priests, rabbis, and imams bend their knees before such triumphant omnipotence?

Oh, no, suggests Jesus. The kingdom of God is not like that at all. It's really a very simple matter. The kingdom of God is as impressive as a woman who lost a coin.

She spent the rest of the day looking for the coin. When she found it she invited her neighbors over to celebrate. Some think that this coin was part of her dowry. Without a full dowry she would not be able to meet the demands of a suitor. The coin might have come from a bridal tiara. Some scholars think that it was worth about a day's wages. Most of us would not think about losing a day's wage. Our budget would hardly know the difference. But for a first century woman in Palestine that meant she would not be able to feed her family for a day.

By the way, did you notice that the heroine in this story is a nameless, powerless, peasant woman? This is hardly the stuff of magic kingdoms.

Allow me to share this with you. Luke does not mention it, but I assure you it is true. Before the woman's life would end she would lose all kinds of things – recipes, lambs, children, husbands, glasses, sense of humor, hope, health, conscience, and many more. Some she would find again. She is like my grandfather who spent an entire afternoon looking for his glasses. When my mother stopped by his house she found them. They were on top of his head!

Be assured that this woman was responsible. We know that immediately because she knew the coin was lost. The household inventory was etched in her mind and a lost coin set off all kinds of alarms. We know that she spent the whole day looking for the coin. She swept the floor hoping to hear the tinkle of the coin rolling across the floor. This was a frugal steward of her resources. Prodigality was not in her nature. She would not wander off like some silly lamb. She was faithful to the resources that had been given to her.

Like many people the woman often lost things. Indeed, if nothing were lost, there would be no story. I'll be honest with you; my household is not so neat and clean as the woman's in this parable. In the process of moving from one place to another over the decades we have found things we forgot we even owned or thought we had lost years ago. I cannot tell you how many projects I have started and cannot find the parts I need or the tools essential to complete the project. Of course, when the project is over the original parts and tools will be discovered. I cannot tell you the number of times I have lost children. One hid in the cabinet of a clothing display at J. C. Penny's. She closed the door. We were frantic. Announcements were made over the public address system. Mall security was alerted and the police were called. We felt inadequate, stupid, and humiliated. But the child soon got bored and emerged from her hiding place about fifteen minutes later. Then we had to endure the rolling eyes of store clerks and security personnel. I lost, for a time, a child to drugs. I worried for 385 days that I would lose a child in Afghanistan. In all of these situations we were trying to be responsible. We were faithful in our roles as parents.

I submit to you that the household of God is a constant process of losing and finding. The house of faith is a community where valuable things, traditions, and people are lost and found. As responsible as we try to be, some things fall through the cracks, break, and roll into dark crevices. Needs are often not understood, disciplines weaken, motives are misconstrued, people get mad and quit, and we lose our direction. The life of faith is lived in the midst of God's lost and found. I do not know where the kingdom of God would be if it is not the pendulum of the misplaced and the discovered, the forgotten and the remembered, the abandoned and the recovered, the

derelict and the responsible. The kingdom of God prevails in a world of finding and losing.

I am sure there are people who are better Christians than I am. They get it right the first time. They hit a homerun every time they are at bat. They are self-actualized models of fidelity. Their marriages are without conflict. Their children are without flaw. They are the leading sales representative of their company and employee of the year, after year, after year. Their bodies are in top physical condition. Their spiritual lives are centered and they radiate a constant glow of benevolence. They have found God, despite the fact that God was never missing.

That certainly does not represent my life or my faith. And if there is such a person in the house I gladly yield the pulpit to them. No, my life is a life of faith in the midst of joy and sorrow. I have made and I will make mistakes. Garrison Keillor described it so aptly:

“I turned 65 last month, which is about as festive as walking into a brick wall, but I’m OK now. And when I look back on my messy life with all the wrong turns and failures and days I wish I could rewrite, and then I think of the shining child whose picture is on my cell phone, the door of the past closes. You cannot possibly regret anything in a chain of events that led to her existence. So you turn to the future.”¹

The truth of the matter is that the future will hold its share of messes, wrong turns, and days we wish we could rewrite. But the future will also disclose new possibilities, fresh life, and unexpected love. I would hate to think that the parable of the lost coin means that we only have one great day of discovery in our lives. I hope there are more opportunities to find valuable things, valuable people, and valuable

¹ Garrison Keillor, “Don’t be a morose teenager,” *Salon.Com* at <http://www.salon.com/opinion/keillor/2007/09/19>; downloaded 10/10/2007.

truths in the days ahead. I hope there are days when things that I have found reveal a meaning or value I had not known at the time I found them. I would rather not be found if faith is the dull contempt of familiarity.

I think the kingdom of God is the discovery of life in this world. Perhaps when I die I will discover some other dimension of God's presence. But the present moment is where I dwell today and is the only universe where discovery is possible for me. As a man of faith it is my task to be mindful of that which is lost and what we are losing. It is my task to seek and sometimes find. Maybe my children will take up my work and the clues that I leave behind will help them discover things I had only longed for.

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