

*Lost, Found and Sometimes, In the Way...*  
Luke 15:1-10

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Some years ago I had the occasion to return to the parish I served in Scotland during a pulpit exchange. Knowing I would be in the area, I called my friend Elinor, with whom I had exchanged, and asked if it would suit for me to come to worship. She graciously replied that, most certainly it would, but that I should be advised that the worship service would be quite a bit different that day. She went on to write that her church, the Kildrum Parish, had opened its doors to a group called Causeway Prospects. This group is a Christian organization concerned with, in their own words, “working together with individuals with learning disabilities to insure they can lead fulfilled lives.” Elinor wrote me that the clients of the Causeway Prospects would themselves be leading worship that day and so I should expect skits about biblical stories.

So, on Sunday morning, I walked over to the church where Elinor warmly welcomed me and then she turned the service over to the men and women served by Causeway Prospects and their advocates.

The texts they were to act out are our texts today, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. As their advocates and teachers shepherded these adults gently in to the chancel, some wore their conditions visibly, such as those with Down Syndrome, some looked impoverished and some looked quite wealthy.

One woman stood off to the side, probably about 55 years old, beautifully dressed and impeccably coiffed – I assumed she was a leader until she stood awkwardly when she didn’t understand the instructions until her friend came and took her by the hand and led her to where the others had moved. As we all watched, they read the stories about lost and found sheep and coins and acted them without self-consciousness.

I have to tell you about an insight that I am embarrassed to admit hit me like a thunderbolt.

As I was watching it quickly became evident to me that there were a variety of degrees of economic viability represented. As I sat in the pew and my mind wandered, I began to think of the reality that, if one is normally able, then economic hardship in life is an obstacle that we are taught, almost from birth in America, one can overcome. In our land of opportunity, and really in any land of opportunity, if you work hard, you'll probably do pretty well for yourself if economics are any measure. But if your abilities lie elsewhere and your brain processes information more slowly or in different ways, well, the evidence was clear: your station in life is your station in life and the advantages and disadvantages of class became all the more evident. As I sat in the pew, thinking of lost and found and who will seek the lost sheep, it struck me as a profoundly unfair thing that for those without advocates, the best you can get is the best the system offers, regardless of whether the system works or not. But that's not the thunderbolt. As I sat thinking of this reality – my mind grazed on over to thinking about the kingdom of God. As I sat there, I thought to myself, "Well, no doubt this is all true. But in the kingdom all is going to be made right. We will, doctrine teaches us, be made whole." I'm not being pietistic and I'm not trying to throw the tough ones off into the kingdom – that really was my thought process and for a brief second I found it comforting.

But here's where my musings got interesting to me. I thought of my dear friends' child who has Down Syndrome, and I thought, "well, what does whole look like for her? How does this get made right without fundamentally changing who she is?"

And that is when the thunderbolt hit me: “Who said she’s the one who needs to be changed for this to be made right?”

Suddenly, I had a different perspective on who was lost.

Theologically *wholeness* is about the restoration of shalom, or God’s reign of peace and justice. I know all that... but it was just so easy to slip into thinking of the categories of “lostness” and “foundness” based not on a vision of the kingdom but on what would be the easiest. It was much tougher to think of what *wholeness* would demand of me and you.

These parables are stories about great joy because that is grace is at its very heart, and it is very tempting to locate ourselves in the parables – I think its unavoidable, really. We are people who relate to ourselves and others through stories and so when we encounter a parable, it’s really tempting to assign parts as it were. And in the case of these parables in particular, it’s even easier because two of the parts belong to an animal and an inanimate object. Three parts to be assigned in two stories: the Pharisee (they’re the audience) and the lost and the seeker.

In a facile glance, the part of finder goes to Jesus. The part of coin/sheep goes to the sinners, and the part of the Pharisees will be played today by...

Now that’s an easy glance and consequently, the lost are the sinners, the found are the saints and the Pharisees, well, we can either lump them in with the sinners or else just assume they are in the way.

That’s an easy interpretation, but if that is the way we interpret it, these are parables dripping with judgmentalism, and that’s not grace and it certainly isn’t joy.

So, let's try again with these parables. Maybe we're the lost. Or maybe we're the found. Sometimes we might be the seeker (or at least the one working for the seeker) and sometimes, we're the sought. And grace being grace and not our doing, every once in a while we're just in the way and God is up to something we haven't figured out yet. I wonder sometimes if we don't rather enjoy being lost? If we are lost, then we're not responsible for our lack of direction. We're lost, Jesus is going to find us, and when he does, we'll have the great joy of being found. There's a whole thread of revivalist preaching that riffs along this theme: you're miserable sinners but Jesus loves you and if you accept him into your heart (again) you can be found!

I really don't mean to mock this line of thinking, but let's look at it critically. First, it makes being found an action of the lost – and second, it treats the condition of *lostness* trivially. Being lost – being fundamentally disoriented, unable to see the right way out, unable to retrieve oneself from the condition – that's not something to be considered trivially. Lostness is when the conditions required to pull oneself out are more than one could ever reasonably expect or be expected to manage alone. Addiction – lostness. Homelessness – lostness. Loneliness – lostness. Being lost is real. And any rescue from being lost is grace. And anything less than that is trivial.

We trivialize lostness and the accompanying grace when we act like sinners are the source of their own problems. To be sure, self destructive behavior abounds and we bear responsibility for our bad actions, but grace – being found - isn't about saving ourselves, grace is about the transformative inbreaking of kindness.

Before we move on to the concept of “foundness” I do want to touch once more on that idea that we're all lost – because we are. Sin is, at its heart, the rejection and breaking of

Shalom, or God's peaceable, just vision for the world. We all participate in it, whether we want to or not. So, sin isn't just lying, cheating, stealing and committing adultery, though those activities certainly qualify – sin is primarily participation in a system that is fundamentally unjust and unpeaceful – broken. If we are honest about God's vision for creation, we know that as long as violence and poverty persist, this isn't it. So we are all lost, in need of being found. That's why Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us that we sin in our best deeds as well as our worst. That is why sitting in that Scottish Church, I had the profound realization that I had, in fact, missed the point.

Now we can think about being found. If being lost is the condition of being trapped in a dystopia, then being found must surely be the participation in a utopia.

Well, not so realistically. The kingdom hasn't come. There is plenty of evidence to remind us that is not the case. But being found doesn't mean being perfect yet. Being found means working for the kingdom and being an agent of grace.

You know what grace is – I like this working definition: grace is the unmerited, undeserved, unconditional love of God. Nothing we do causes it, nothing we do can escape it... God decided to love us and to do so unconditionally. Its why we are simultaneously lost and found, both sinner and saint. That's why foundness is not something to brag about, it's something profoundly to celebrate and share. Grace is not a commodity to be proud of but a gift to share. Which is why we, being both lost and found can ultimately be the seeker, on behalf of the one who sought us, because grace is not about what we've done, grace is always about what God is doing. That is the grace we celebrate in baptism – that God is doing something, sometimes despite our efforts! That's why we baptize both adults, who've chosen their path, and infants, whose parents

have declared they will bring them up to know the grace of the Lord. I wonder sometimes if the difference between lost and found is mostly about timing – because the parable is clear the seeker never stops until the lost are found.

And we are tasked with being agents of the one who sought us, giving grace, seeking those who are in need of aid, and finding in ourselves somehow, the ability to offer the aid that is needed with kindness and humility.

What a profound calling.

What are you doing about it? A few weeks ago, the faithful remnant who were here on Labor Day had the experience of watching me squirm on the hook as I considered the implications of a story for your clergy. But now it is my turn to return the favor and ask you plainly, if grace is real, what are you doing about it?

Which brings me to the final vantage point from which to consider this parable, which is the vantage point of being *in the way*.

Nothing would please me more than to say that the church is never, ever in the way of grace. It would please me, but it would not be true and you would know it, because the condition of being simultaneously lost and found, sinner and saint, means that we aren't perfect and consequently, our attempts to mediate grace might just wind up well, being in the way of God. Again, Niebuhr reminds us we sin in our best deeds as well as our worst. That could be seen as a pessimistic way to look at things.

Think about it this way. David Brooks wrote an op-ed piece in the New York Times entitled *The Gospel of Wealth* and it gets to the heart of it.

I'm going to grossly simplify what he said. Brooks said when our economy got overheated, we lost our minds and we bought everything too big, too bright, too flashy

and too much. And in the bust, we've actually gained clarity. Working to further this clarity is a minister named David Platt. Platt is a pastor who served a megachurch and drew the determination that the perhaps a large part of the problem churches face in mediating grace is the culture of large itself. Brooks cites him, "Americans have built themselves multi-million dollar worship palaces, he argues. These have become like corporations, competing for market share by offering social centers, child-care programs, first class entertainment and comfortable, consumer Christianity. Jesus, Platt notes, made it hard on his followers. He created a minichurch, not a mega one. Today, however, building budgets dwarf charitable budgets, and Jesus is portrayed as a genial suburban dude. 'When we gather in our church building to sing and lift up our hands in worship, we may not actually be worshipping the Jesus of the Bible, instead we may be worshipping ourselves.'"<sup>1</sup>

That's not really our schtick here, but what Brooks is talking about is actually much subtler. He's talking making idols out of particular visions and losing sight of what God is calling us to do.

So let me repeat the question: if grace is real, what are you doing about it?

You see, when Jesus told these stories, it was to the Pharisees. Those poor Pharisees, they've been so maligned, and I'm being quite serious. They weren't trying to be difficult... in fact the very fact that they are so often Jesus' conversation partners indicates to some that they were perhaps the closest conversation partners Jesus had... they wanted to be good, wanted to live faithfully and they wanted to know why Jesus was associating with sinners! It's plenty easy to malign them and lump them in with exactly

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks, David. NYT 09-07-2010. *The Gospel of Wealth*

the sort of scenario Brooks describes, but it wouldn't be accurate any more than it would be fair to sit here and judge the faith of those who worship at the megachurchs Platt is challenging. The point is the Pharisees are faithfully trying to be faithful and in the process... they got in the way. So do we all sometimes.

It's painfully easy to be in the way of grace. It just takes one thing: assuming that our mind is the mind of God and our ways are the ways of God. We have to test our vision – as a church and on our own.

Faithful living means that we need to be ahead of the curve of culture, not behind it, not reacting to circumstances pedantically pedaling moralism like those maligned Pharisees, but instead daring to risk being open to God's leading. The stories of grace we encountered this morning about lostness and foundness and our fundamental inability to make ourselves one or the other but only to live in grace and seek to share that grace as widely and inclusively as possible are but a reminder of the calling God has given us. And we have to *do* something about it.

German theologian Helmut Thielicke claimed that the calling of the Christian is to risk heresy in the sharing of a grace as wide as God's love. The function of the church is to be the needle on the compass of culture pointing toward grace. That's our calling, and it's not easy because it requires constantly pushing our own self imposed perceptions of lostness and foundness in order to respond to the needs of the world for grace. That is what the church is here to do, to tell the story of grace and the point the way to it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.