

Lost and Found

Psalm 14; Luke 15:1-10
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Kickoff Sunday – September 11, 2022

"I once was lost, but now am found."

That is the heart of the good news of our faith in Jesus Christ. The good news that we profess, that has been handed down to us by our mothers and father in the faith, and that we are *learning* to trust – for it turns out there are several aspects of this good news that our hardened hearts can resist – the good news is that the Creator God of the Universe, revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ, and made real to each of us by the power of the Holy Spirit, has a heart for those who are lost and will go to every length necessary to find them.

Over the course of the next year, we will be exploring the theme of a "Journey Into the Heart of God." "Journey Into the Heart of God." This theme is related to our conviction that we sat with last Sunday, that we need to sink ourselves down into God. That what our world needs right now is a few communities - here and there around the planet - who are rooted and grounded in the love, justice, mercy, and truth of God. Another way to think about sinking yourself down into God is to see yourself as being on a *journey into the heart of God*.

This theme – of journeying into the heart of God – raises the obvious question for us, What does one find when one journeys into the heart of God? Because if we are right about all of this, the heart of God is our true home – that's why we believe that we need to sink ourselves down into God. And when we consciously and intentionally dwell and abide in the heart of God, over time, our hearts and our lives will begin to take on the character of the quality of God's heart. So over the coming year, we will be exploring this theme together – in worship, in small groups, in our music ministry, in Sunday school classes with children, youth, adults, in our Matthew 25 work, in our Earth Care work, and more.

Our gospel reading today from Luke 15 goes very quickly to the heart of what is in the heart of God. The God of the Bible has a heart for those who are lost. The shepherd searches for the lost sheep. The woman searches for the lost coin. God searches for those who are lost.

My own sense is that this is news *that we crave*. At the same time, it is news that we do not completely trust. And, it may even be news that we resist in some ways.

All of which is to say that our relationship with the heart of God is *complicated*.

I think the reason we crave this news – the news that God has a heart for those who are lost – is because we know that we ourselves are among those who are lost. Now, we may not wear that very proudly on our sleeves. But we know it down deep in our hearts. Deep down, we know that we're lost.

When I was a little boy, I used to really want to be an adult, because from my childhood vantage point, I looked around at the adults in my life, and it sure looked to me like they had life all figured out. They looked confident, they looked like they had the answers, they looked like they knew how things worked. Now that I've made it to the ripe age of 50, I find myself wanting to go back to find those adults in Clinton, South Carolina, who seemed so secure and confident, because based on my own experience, I've got a feeling that they weren't as sure about things as I thought. Being human, being mortal – in the title of the remarkable book by Atul Gawande – is an inherently bewildering, troubling, and unsettling enterprise.

But it's not just the inherent challenges of being human. Each of us has also made choices that have not served us well, there are things we have done and there are things we have left undone, we have pushed away or covered up parts of our personality or our personal history that we don't want others to know about. These parts of our lives – decisions made, acts committed, parts of ourselves that we feel shame about – these parts are like the lost sheep or the lost coin in our text today. And because we have pushed these parts of ourselves away, we are not whole persons, we are not fully integrated persons. This lack of wholeness weighs heavily on us. It takes enormous energy to live a disconnected, fragmented life. The parts of our lives that we think others would reject or the things that we have done that we regret get surrounded by an enormous amount of fear that others will come to know about them. These parts of ourselves, these lost parts of ourselves, weigh so heavily on us, and so the news that Jesus has come to seek and to save the lost ones resonates deeply within us, because know that we are those lost ones ourselves.

But it is also the case that we resist this good news. We resist it for ourselves, and we resist it for others. It is common for us to observe that we typically want God's mercy for ourselves, but we don't think that others deserve the same kind of merciful treatment. "Good for me, but not for thee." We love it when someone lets us cut in line at the grocery store or out on 495, but when the shoe is on the other foot, and someone wants to cut in line in front of us, all of a sudden, we may find ourselves avoiding eye contact with the one trying to get in. And if the other one happens to be an enemy of ours in some way, or if they have hurt us or someone we love, then we may actually find it morally offensive to see them as the recipient of mercy.

This is a hard word to hear, and we should not minimize how hard the gospel can be to receive. In our text today, we can get a sense of this difficulty in the grumbling reaction of the Pharisees and scribes – who were not wicked people, as they

are so often portrayed in church reading, but were good, religious people trying to do what is right – their grumbling at the sight of Jesus eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners can begin to look quite familiar.

But it is not only for others that we can resist the news that God has a heart for the lost. We can also resist it for ourselves. And this may even be a harder word for us to hear. The news that Jesus came to seek and restore the lost means two difficult things, when we apply this gospel truth to ourselves. First, it means that we do not get to congratulate ourselves for being among those who have been found. Being found is not a reward for being awesome. Being found is a gift from the heart of God who accepts every part of us – the good, the bad, and the ugly. We are not accepted because of how hard we have worked for the kingdom. As Psalm 14 says it bluntly, “There is no one who does good. No, not one.” We are accepted because of the overwhelming love in the heart of God for that which God has made. The gospel strikes a blow at our human pride that really, really wants to get some of the credit.

Secondly, Jesus does not find us and accept us in order to leave us where we are. Jesus finds the sheep to restore it to the fold. Jesus finds the coin to restore it to its rightful place. Jesus finds us to restore us to the path of righteousness and faithfulness.

If you’re anything like me, you’d really like to be found by God, but to continue right on doing some of the things that may not all be aligned with God’s will. We want to be justified, but we don’t want to be sanctified. We want to be accepted as we are, but we don’t want to change how we live. We want to be conformed to Jesus Christ, but we also want to be conformed and acceptable and impressive to the world. We want to be accepted, but we don’t want to give up our various addictions.

The good news is that God is very patient and very persistent. God’s love will not let us go. The good shepherd will search for us until we are found. And if we are found, and then we wander off again, the shepherd will come looking for us again. And again. And again. We once were lost, but now we’re found.

Friends, we are on a journey into the heart of God. The heart of God is our true home, and the longer we abide and dwell in the heart of God, the more our own hearts and lives will take on the character and the quality of God’s heart. We’re going to do that, together.

To the gracious, holy, and merciful God, and to God alone, be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.