

September 15, 2013
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Lost and Found

I remember the feeling of panic very distinctly. Looking around the department store and noticing that my family was nowhere to be seen.

Not over there where I had last seen them by the watches. Not there where we had stopped to look at sweaters. Not around any of the clothing racks. And not under any of them. I checked just in case. I couldn't find my family anywhere. I had lost them.

I remember the panic distinctly. I knew I was lost. And the moment I realized it, I decided I would do what made the most sense. I would go sit in the car. Yes, that made the most sense. Of course. I would go sit in the car out there somewhere in that vast parking lot. And I would wait there. It made perfect sense in my six year old mind. I knew what our car looked like and I would just go find it. So I headed out into the mall to find the parking lot. But once I was out in the mall, I realized I didn't know where to go from there. Was it that way? Or that way? I couldn't quite remember. Did we come in by the Orange Julius stand? Or the pretzel cart? Nothing looked familiar. And I was feeling more frightened

by the second and more certain that I was going to be in big, big trouble. But I couldn't go back. My parents were lost. I had no choice now, but to keep going. And hope that somehow I would stumble upon our car. Then a lady approached me. She must have recognized a lost little kid when she saw one. "Do you need some help?," she asked. By this point, I was so frightened that I didn't care if I got in trouble. So I let her take me to the nearest safety officer who led me to the mall office. "Lost girl?," they asked in the office. "Lost girl," he replied. And there I sat in the mall office no longer lost, but not entirely found. Just wanting my family back.

I remember the feeling of losing my parents. And now that I have kids, I can imagine how my parents felt losing their child. How their guts clenched up when they realized I wasn't there. That I wasn't anywhere. How they must have looked around every clothing rack, and checked underneath just in case. Looking and looking and looking. Starting to sweat. Trying to keep from imagining the worst. "Where could she have gone? She was just here a second ago. I thought she was with you. I thought she was with you. Didn't she know to just sit down and wait if

she didn't know where we were? Did someone take her? Is she hurt?

Why weren't we more careful? How could we have let this happen?

What kind of parents are we? When will we see her again?"

When you've lost someone, all you can think about is finding them. All you can do is everything you can do to get them back. Nothing else matters. Nothing will stop you. You must find them. Because that person cannot stay lost. Because if they are lost, then you are lost too.

Maybe you have been there. Maybe you know what it's like to lose someone. Maybe you know the terrible, desperate panic and the single-minded focus to searching. Maybe you know what that's like. But does God? Does God really feel that way about the lost? Is God really that determined to find them and rejoice over them?

Jesus seemed to think that God was awfully interested in the lost. He ate with them and hung out with them. Which confused the Pharisees. Like many religious folks, they tried to avoid the lost. After all, they were lost. They had chosen to be lost. They had chosen to wander off and abandon the ways of God. Going off with the other prodigal son types. Maybe to Las Vegas. Engaging in the types of sin you hear about on

Maury Povich. Oh, the Pharisees knew all about the lost people. The wanderers and squanderers and drifters. They knew about those lost people, but so did Jesus. He knew about them too. And he insisted that God knew these people and that God LOVED these people. And for God's sake, that's why he was there, to find them and redeem them and bring them back home. Healthy people don't need a doctor, Jesus would say. Those who are found don't need to be sought. I have come to seek and save the lost.

Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the lost one? Which one of you having ten silver dollars and losing one would not turn on the lights and sweep the whole house until it is found? And when the lost is found, which one of you does not rejoice? And cry with relief and shout for joy? And get all your friends together for a party? That's how it is in heaven, Jesus says. That's how it is with God. God's heart is set on finding the lost and bringing them home.

Who doesn't leave the 99 sheep in the wilderness to look for one? No one, Jesus. No one does that, the Pharisees said. Are you crazy?

Searching for one sheep when you've still got 99? You cut your losses. You protect the flock you still have. You focus on those who didn't get lost in the first place. The ones who stayed put just like they should. Who never purposefully or even accidentally wandered away. Forget about the lost and be happy with the ones you've got. But Jesus insists that that's not how God feels about the lost. God wants to find them. And the greatest party you'll ever see in heaven is when they are found. Jesus has come to seek and save the lost. And I wonder if we don't resent that a little bit about God. Just like the Pharisees. We resent that God would want anything to do with the lost. I am reminded of a billboard on New Circle Road somewhere near the Old Frankfort Pike exit. It always has a fire and brimstone message on it. "Heaven or Hell? You decide." Currently I think it says, "God is not mocked." The message, I think, is for those who are mocking God. According to this local church that put the billboard up. You, whoever you are, are mocking God. With your disobedience. And sin. And absence from our church. All of you lost souls out there. Which really, I thought, could be any of us. Any of us who have wandered. Or doubted. Or disbelieved.

Any of us who have made mistakes or acted in ignorance. Any of us who have ever walked away from God or church in disappointment. Many of us might be lost according to others, but we don't mind. We don't mind being lost if being found means that you can't be kind to Muslims or immigrants or gay people. We don't mind being lost if being found means that you can't love science or evolution. We don't mind being lost if being found means you can't be a Goth or a biker or a drag queen or a weirdo or freak flag flyer. We don't mind being lost if being found means that you can't be broken or wandering or missing or confused or in need of a Savior.

There are lots of lost people in the world, but the truth is, is that often times, we are one of them. Even though our lives are hidden in Christ. Even though we know for certain that Jesus Christ is ours and we are his. We also can feel lost. Do you ever feel sometimes like you have no idea where you are? That you have no idea where your life is headed? That you are just wandering? And that you are missing out on some greater joy and a greater hope? That you have no idea where God is? That maybe you've lost God somewhere in the clothing racks of the

department store. And you don't know how it happened and you are all alone and nothing looks familiar and there is no one to take you by the hand and say it's going to be OK. Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel like you are lost? Do you wonder if anyone cares? Do you wonder if you are worth finding? Do you wonder why God would come looking for you?

If you feel lost, then let me tell you, you aren't alone. We've all been there. Some of us may be there now. This is a community of people lost and found. People a bit misplaced, people a bit out of sorts. People who have been lost in the deepest, darkest place and have had Jesus find them. That's what the Apostle Paul's story is today. I was lost, he says. I was as lost as lost could be. I was as separated from God as was humanly possible. I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. I was L-O-S-T, lost. I've been there. But God found me. And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Love would not let me go. And love will not let you go either.

AJ was lost. He is a drug addict. And over the past two decades, he sacrificed every relationship that mattered for the sake of drugs and alcohol. He came to the Hope Center's Recovery program in Lexington because a judge ordered him to. He says, "I resented being forced into recovery. In fact, I actually longed to return to the jail that I had been in and out of since I was a teenager. I knew deep down that jail would be easier than taking responsibility for my addiction. From the moment I arrived at the Hope Center, staff members made it clear that my recovery was my responsibility. They also made it clear that I would not have to go it alone. And for me, that is what made the difference. For the first time in my life, my way of thinking was challenged—not by the criminal justice system or society at large, but by people who have been where I've been, struggled with what I struggled with, and were able to overcome it. I was no longer afraid to change. I was afraid of what would happen if I didn't change. Graduates of the Recovery Program taught many of my recovery classes. These men opened my eyes and gave me hope for my future. They gave me the tools that I needed to manage my recovery, and held me accountable for my behavior and

choices. Since completing the Hope Center's Recovery Program, I have untangled many of the relationships that have been knotted up by my addiction. And for the first time in 20 years, I believe that the door to my future is wide open. My name is A.J., and today, I am a recovering drug addict.¹”

We all can be lost. But we all can be found. Wherever we are. Wherever we have been. We can be lost, but we can be found. Whatever we struggle with. Whatever hardships we bear. Whatever relationships are crumbling. None of us is a lost cause. Each of us can be lost, but each of us can be found. Because Jesus has come to seek and save the lost. And he'll do whatever it takes to get to us. He'll give up heaven for us. He'll go to hell and back for us. Because God wants God's children back. Jesus just wants to get us home.

We all can be lost and we all can be found. We've been there. And because we have been lost and found, we are ready to rejoice. And we are determined to help others get there too. Just like that lady in the mall who recognized a scared, lost little girl when she saw one and asked, Do

¹ http://www.hopectr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91&catid=35&Itemid=67

you need some help? We can help. We can listen. We can understand.

We can speak the truth in love. We can make a space for one another to

meet Jesus. Rejoice! God has been looking for you, friend! You aren't

alone. You aren't lost. Rejoice! You are found. You are going home.